MARCH 1st ISSUE, 1930
VOL. LXXIII No. 6
W

ADVENTURE

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MARCH 1st

Adventure

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By

GEORGES SURDEZ

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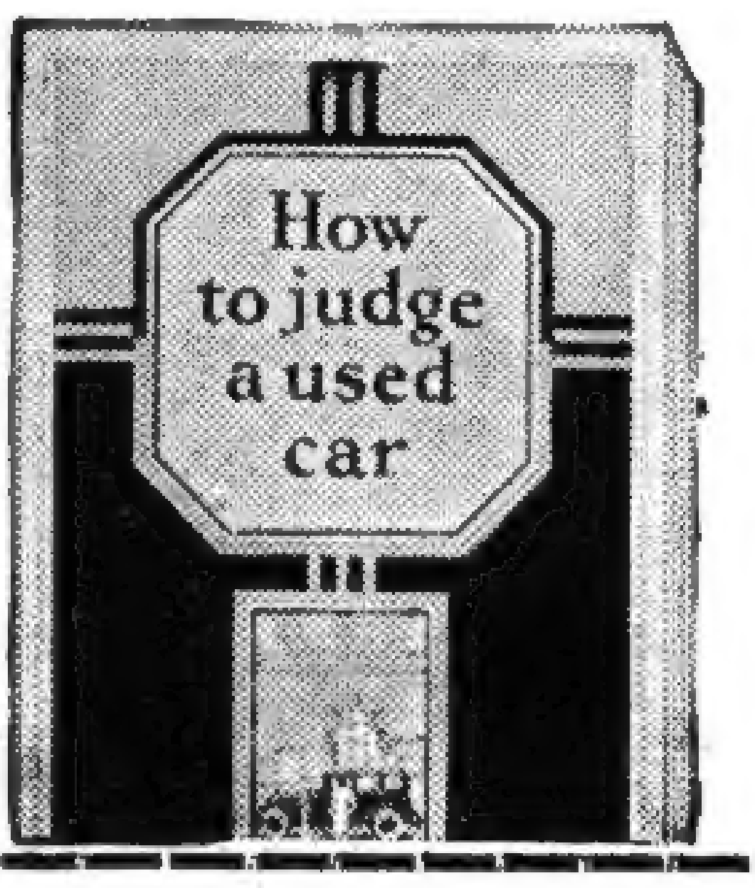
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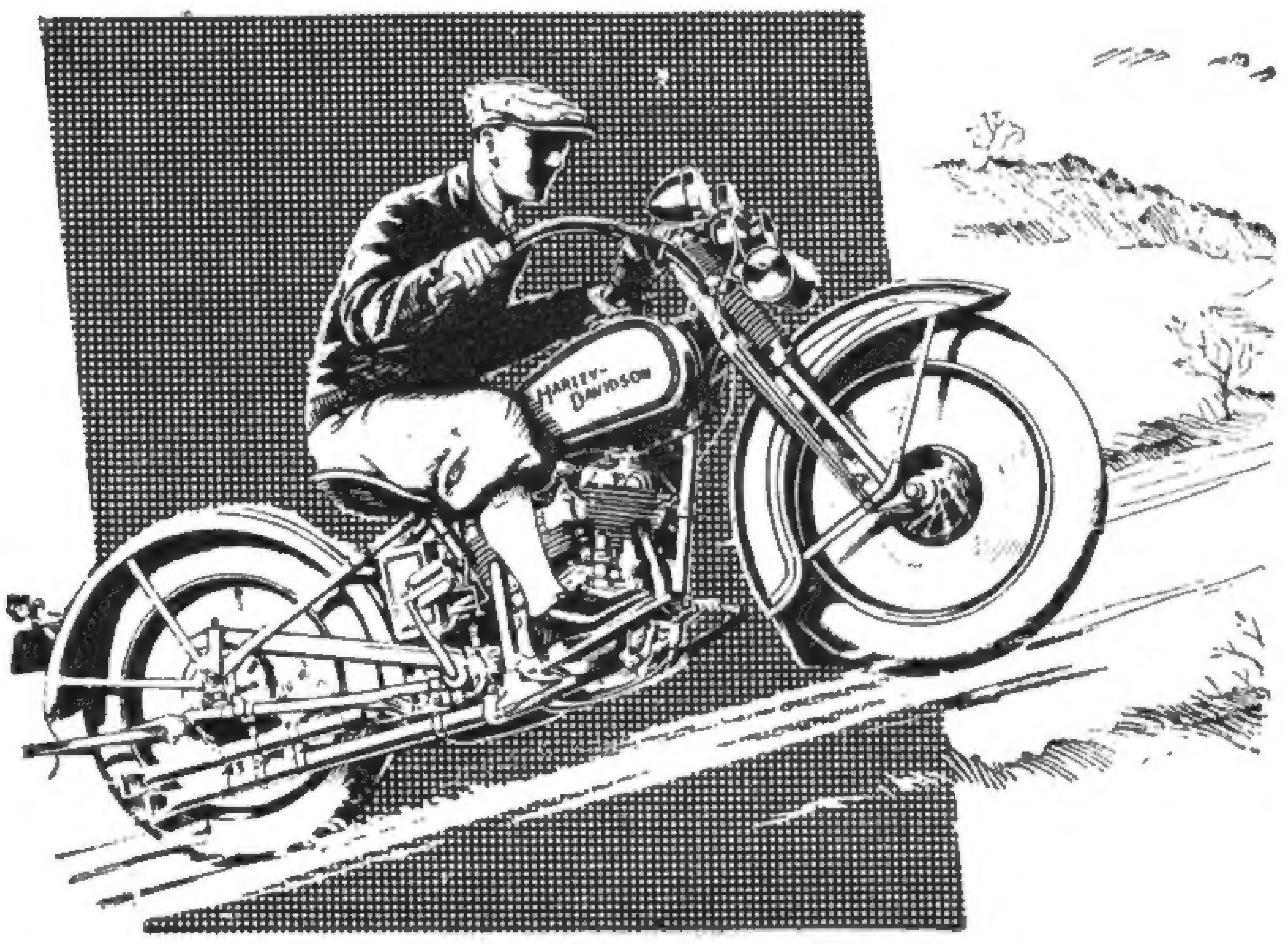

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March 1st, 1930

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Volume 73
Number 6

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The six o'clock mystery . . .

Herlock Sholmes and his good friend Batson had noticed the man when he came in at precisely 6:03½ P. M.

"A dangerous looking fellow," murmured Sholmes. "Notice the twitching nerves around his eyes, and the smoldering impatience in every gesture. He'll bear watching . . ."

At 6:27 the man reappeared . . . a beam of loving kindness in his eye, a low jolly whistle on his lips.

"I say, Batson!" said Herlock, "the man must be a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. I never saw such an astounding change in a personality! We must find the cause."

Picture Herlock and his faithful Batson in the man's apartment . . . measuring, digging through drawers, peering into corners. But pill or powder found they none!

Then Herlock threw open the bathroom door. A tropical warmth still lingered in the air, and the mirror was misted with steam. A splash of water on the floor . . . a heap of damp towel . . . and in the soap dish, a smooth, alabaster-white rectangle.

"Eureka!" he cried, "I have it!"

"Have what?" asked Batson, who never was very bright.

Herlock scorned to answer. He drew a tub . . . he threw off his clothes . . . he tossed the rectangle upon the water . . . and as he slid luxuriously into the steaming bath, he uttered these cryptic words—"It floats."

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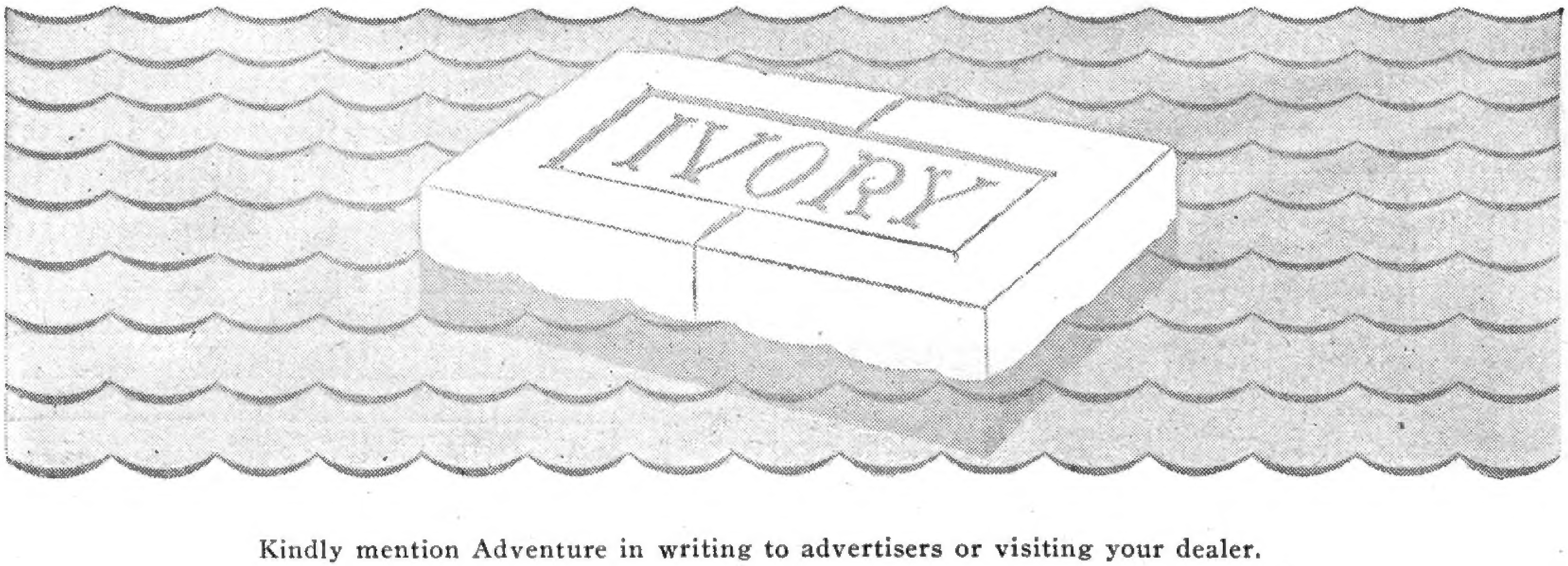

Adventure
(Registered U. S. Patent Office)

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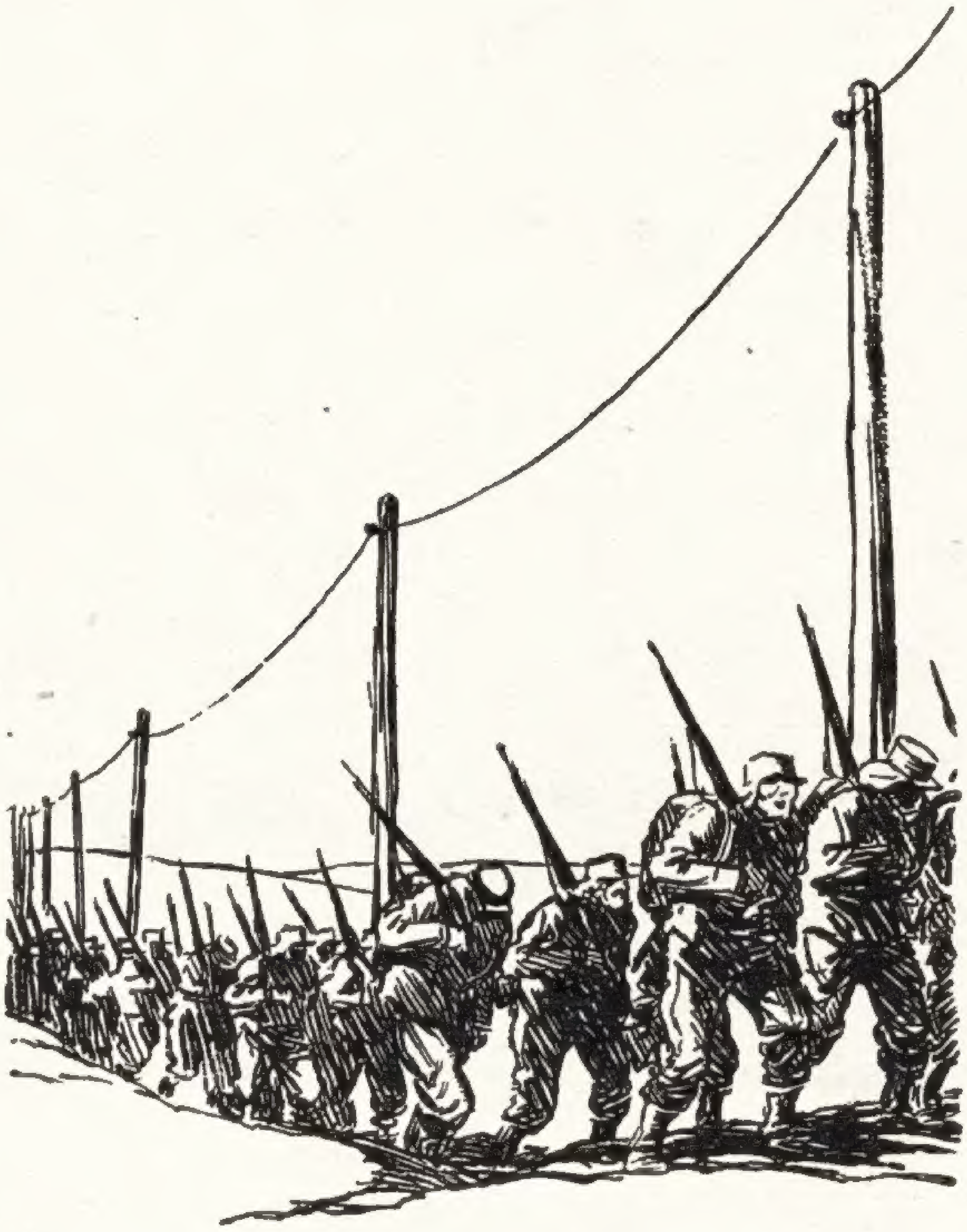
Beginning an Epic Story of

THEY MARCH

By

GEORGES SURDEZ

A Two-Part Novel



CHAPTER I

UNDER FIRE

TELEGRAPH poles—they succeeded one another across the blazing void of the sandy plain from horizon to horizon. The single wire strung on top vanished in the glare. But the poles—the poles were planted every fifty meters to toll off progress implacably, with pitiless accuracy.

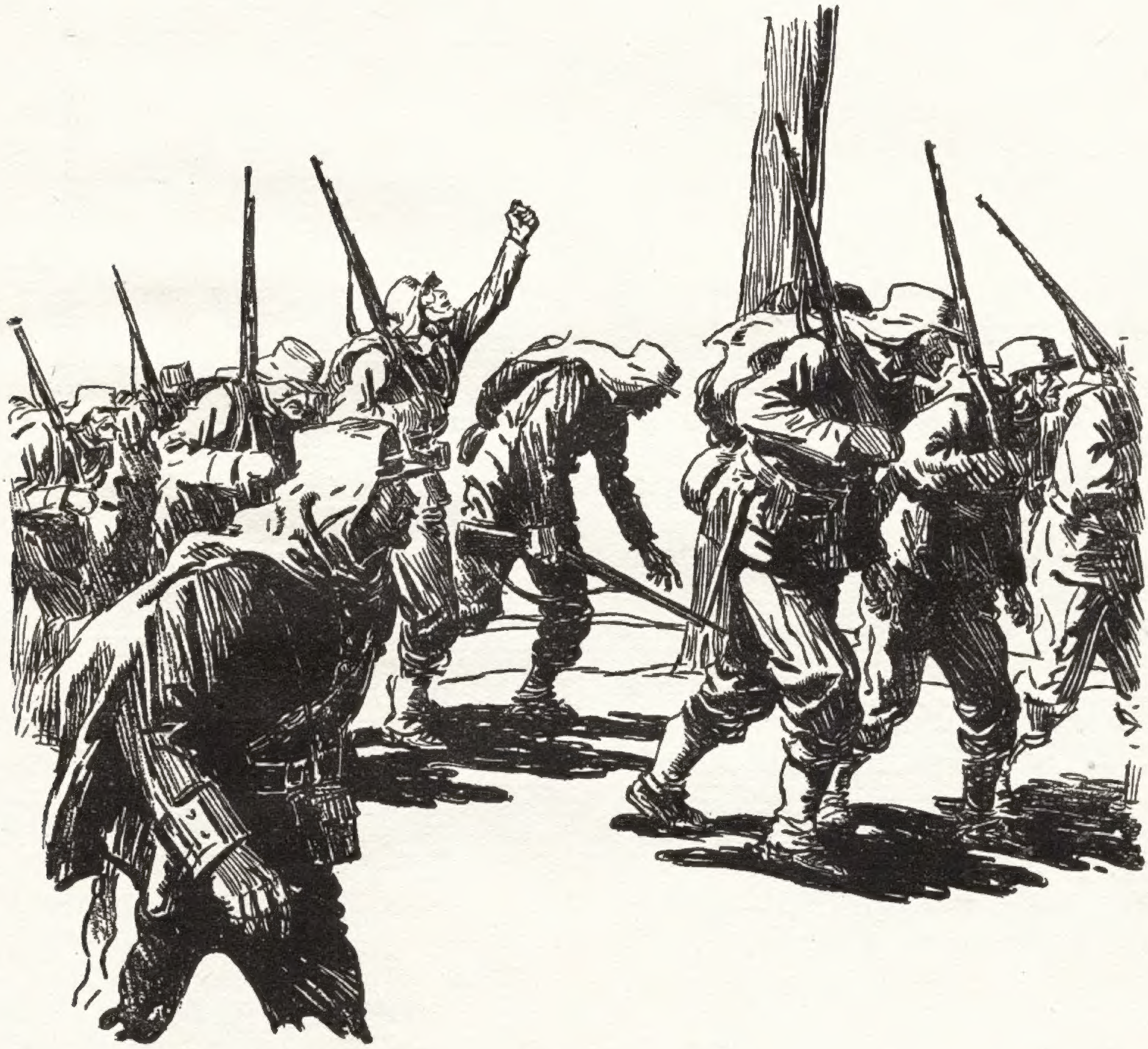
The section of the Foreign Legion, forty men in a little column plodding three abreast, was bound south. The khaki patch bristling with the rigid line of the rifles, fluttering with every quiver of each white neckcloth, crept persistently from pole to pole—fifty meters, one hundred meters, one hundred and fifty meters; one, two, three poles.

Poles, big around as trees, and in the remote planes of the sunlit distance, thick as a match, thick as a toothpick, thin as a needle, thin as a thread. And those as yet unseen, waiting to leap into view, marking off fifty meters . . .

Not a song, not a joke; sun and fatigue had slain humor. From time to time a hysterical grumble rose, swept from rank to rank, fused from one man to another, was repeated in alternative curses and prayers.

"The poles — the poles — curse the poles!"

A boulder, a blade of grass, a bush, a stray camel, anything would have proved *the French Foreign Legion*



FROM YESTERDAY

a diversion. But there was nothing for the burnt pupils to hold on, nothing but the swirling dust, the telegraph poles jutting from the sand, fifty meters apart. In a sort of madness men counted aloud.

"Thirty-nine, forty, forty-one, forty-two—"

"Can't see that far, you liar!"

"Thirty-eight, thirty-nine—"

The charm of the far south, the lure of the Sahara. Emptying canteens, burning feet, aching limbs, broiling brains and the telegraph poles to mark off the yards of the torturing march. And the flies, clinging to the skin, seeking the swift-drying sweat.

"Thirty-seven, thirty-eight, thirty-nine, forty," voices chanted monotonously.

"Shut up!"

"Kill him!"

"Thirty-nine, forty—"

To many of the men the poles had long since grown animated; they did not change but were the same, striding parallel with the little column, torturing phantoms, tall and black against the sky. A veteran sergeant started a song, which ended quickly. The rhythm kept pace to the ceaseless appearance of the poles from the horizon.

Private Edouard Maguil, soldier of the Legion for the past eight months, was meeting his first desert test. He walked on, half blinded, all sense of wonder dulled, killed within him, knowing only that immense fatigue changed the muscles of his thighs to white hot wires, that even the light equipment packed in the tent canvas against his back was swelling in weight.

"March or croak—"

His body seemed to grow taller, rangier at each stride. At the end of a straining neck his face stood out against the white cloth, beneath the white *képi*, fleshless, tanned, the regular features, strong nose, massive chin, chiseled by heat to gaunt sharpness. His puckered lids, between which filtered his slate gray eyes, were the center of squint wrinkles. Twenty-three, and a soldier of the Legion eight months.

"March or croak," he muttered.

The little understood slogan of desert marches crackled in his mind, cut through his consciousness like forked lightning. Each man could count on his own physical resources only, for if one fell no one could burden himself to help. He would be left behind, to die of thirst, or to be found still alive by the native prowlers. Found without weapons—for the breech would be removed from his rifle by a sergeant. This avoided the easy solution of suicide and kept a good weapon from falling into the hands of the enemy.

Maguil wanted to live, so his left foot followed his right, his right foot followed his left, endlessly, more than fifty times between poles, with thousands of poles waiting ahead to pounce from the void and toll off the miles.

He was an American, alone of his nation upon the plain. All of Central Europe was represented—Germans who had, not so many years before, passed over the roads of France; Russians from both sides of the Revolution; Croatians; Greeks; Belgians. They were keeping their end of the bargain. In exchange for shelter and food they must suffer and die.

"Just a couple of hours more," encouraged the lieutenant in command.

He was short, wiry; his mustache was graying. His eyes were piercing and green under sagging lids. Pavert had once carried a pack, toted a rifle, with the first columns in Morocco. The War had brought him his commission. On foot as were the rest, he alone seemed free, on the surface, from the obsession of the poles.

"The column is at a kilometer forty-eight. It'll be in sight soon—"

They had started from the outpost of El-Sherr, Saharan Territory, at five in the morning. Noon was long since passed and the hour of rest. Somewhere in the sun ahead, Lieutenant-Colonel De Beau-Rivage's column was waiting for them—to move down upon Ksar-el-Asrar, goal of the expedition, stronghold of raiders, a knife planted in the flank of French occupation.

"One hundred and fifty poles left—"

Telegraph poles—

Maguil remembered poles that had flashed into view more quickly, the night when he was still Peter Kempton, resident of New York. He had grasped the wheel of a big roadster and a girl sat by his side.

A smile reached through his weariness and parted his parched lips. A girl—how often that word was pronounced in the stories told around the barrack rooms.

"She was blond, with clear eyes. Her husband beat her. I had no money to take her away."

Or:

"She was dark and small, with a good shape. She had me crazy, then married the other fellow—"

Pathetic little yarns, sometimes true, sometimes adorned with details to show great manliness, understanding and spirit. Seldom a word of hatred, seldom a note of regret—fact, fact, fact.

Maguil had confided in no one, but had often repeated his own story to himself, as he did now, between poles. His own girl floated before his sight, misty yet definite. Nineteen, blond, and as he believed now, inconsequential, unimportant. It had not been her fault, to be perfectly frank, but his own. She had not asked him to please her. He had tried to please her for his own sake. Not even talk of marriage, just a friend—nothing similar, in essence, to the tales of the others. No direct motivation for his deeds.

"One fifty-three," he counted mechanically as the pole passed.

This was much better than looking ahead and counting those in sight. And counting backward gave him the sense of cutting down the distance.

IN HIS real existence Maguil had been Peter Kempton, stepson of Will Kempton and part owner of the Star Garage, somewhere between Dyckman Street and the Harlem River, in New York City. "Where the Bronx borders on the United States," Mae had said.

At birth he had been called Pierre Landrier—he seemed fated to change names—for he was the son of a Frenchman and an Irish girl. The Frenchman had come to the States as an automobile driver in the early days of the industry and had remained. Aviation lured him and he crashed. And his widow had mourned and remarried.

She had died after a few years, and her son, adopted by his step-father, a lean, conscientious New Englander, had remained "home." The relationship between the two was friendship rather than kinship. When Peter graduated from high school Kempton took him into partnership—partly because he had used the mother's money to establish the garage.

Peter did not quite recall how their participation in the bootlegging game had come about. He soon learned, of course, that the trucks stored in the garage at certain times were not what the painted signs on the sides might indicate, unless "Long Distance Moving" was freely interpreted. But then, the policeman on the beat knew as well as the garage owners.

The owners of the trucks, partners, were Ferdy and Siskow. They had many helpers, but those changed often enough not to be definitely recalled. Mortimer Ferdy was a well bred, obviously well educated man of thirty-two, rather handsome in a dark way, given to expensive suits and fine linen. Jack Siskow was a round bellied young fellow of twenty-eight, whose garments were tight on his round frame, who seemed a little too tough for good company and seldom opened his mouth about anything except prizefighting.

Beside the trucks Ferdy stored his roadster, a splendid foreign car, worth several thousand dollars at the Star Garage. And it was from this that the trouble started. Peter owned a second-hand car, roadster also, freshly painted, in excellent order, but nevertheless lacking the elegance of the other bus. Having met Mae at a dance, Peter had followed the acquaintance faithfully enough—and Mae had gone out with him in his own car several times. Then she saw Ferdy's roadster and admired it.

Peter was on good terms with Ferdy, and asked whether, if he took care of the car free of charge, paid for gas and oil and made repairs, he would be permitted to use it when it was idle. Ferdy agreed and the roadster was used more and more frequently.

Then one night Ferdy called up and suggested that Peter go down to the service shop where the car had been left. Peter agreed willingly enough. He was thus able to call for Mae before five o'clock at the downtown office. Dinner, a ride into the country, the return into the city for a dance or two. When he came out from this last place a detective was waiting by the car and explained to him that while he was not under suspicion, he would have to accept temporary escort. The roadster had been identified as the car driven by the men who had shot and mortally wounded a New Jersey policeman.

They left Mae before her door and then went to the garage. Will Kempton, finding himself a more or less conscious accomplice of murderers, agreed to assist in the arrest of Ferdy when he called up the garage. At the detectives' suggestion Kempton kept Ferdy on the wire until the call had been traced.

Caught near the pay booth five minutes after hanging up, Ferdy easily guessed what had happened. Peter and his stepfather were questioned by the police. As there was no legal proof of criminal knowledge on their part, they were released.

Careless though they had been in the matter of whisky—bootlegging was regarded by many as a rather risky business venture — they were courageous enough to do their strict duty after blood had been spilled, even though letters and phone calls warned them against talking too much. Slight and tacit as had been their complicity, they were deemed traitors by the men behind Ferdy. They learned somewhat too late that in the matter of law breaking minor and major crimes are inseparable.

The police itself warned them of danger. The garage was guarded for several weeks until Ferdy, despite the efforts of his attorneys, was extradited to New Jersey for trial. And again, regardless of new warnings, Will Kempton and his stepson gave sworn statements.

Meanwhile Peter's sentimental affairs had not improved. Previous to his troubles his relations with Mae had been casual, friendly. In a surge of loyalty, for which he was not responsible, she insisted on "sticking" to him, against her father's wishes. The father, head of a branch office of a large insurance company, did not look kindly upon even a slight tinge of disrespectability. Mae, who blamed herself for having coaxed Peter into the murder car—which happened to be right enough on that particular occasion—set her will against her family.

About four o'clock one morning, Will Kempton, who had taken the place of the regular night man who was ill, was murdered. Peter, awakening in the middle of the night by a strong premonition of evil —there had been sufficient warnings to explain this without reaching into the supernatural—discovered the body.

Will Kempton's body was on the landing before the office located in the rear of the garage. Peter would always remember his stiff legs stretched grotesquely over the risers. Several bullets had been pumped into his chest and face and there was no back left to his head.

Ferdy's lawyers, strangely enough—with that blissful ignorance of common sense that characterizes that profession when faced with desperately crushing facts—took this second tragedy as proof of their client's innocence. They blamed Jack Siskow, as yet uncaught and against whom a heavy past had been discovered, for both killings.

Peter was then warned, both by anonymous correspondence and the police, that he was "next." After what he had seen on the landing he was not inclined to take such notices lightly. For awhile he refused to leave, lived on as before in the little apartment he had shared with his stepfather.

Another premonition—this also founded on known facts and the definite knowledge that he would not live long if he remained in New York—and he turned over the business to a trusted man and quietly slipped out of the States, on a French freight ship bound for Cette. From there he went to Eastern France and for three months lived there with his grandfather, Pierre Landrier.

HIS UNCLE, Kilpatrick, a member of the plainclothes force, had his address and kept him informed of developments in New York. One by one the members of the gang which had been headed by

Ferdy were caught. Several were still at large, including Jack Siskow. Two other murders had occurred—both victims being informers against the gang. The United States, as far as Peter was concerned, was decidedly unsafe.

Peter's quiet sojourn on his grandfather's farm was ended by a summons to appear before the military authorities. In spite of his American birth he was liable for military service. His birth had been registered at the French Consulate and when he came of age he had neglected to make the needed declaration.

The officers at headquarters in Besançon explained that even waiving this technicality a residence of six months in France would make him legally bound. Return to the States? Impossible just then—others under police protection had fallen. Leave for Switzerland, Germany? Then what?

On the same floor with the inquiring officer's office was the enlistment bureau. Men were entering to join the Colonial Infantry, in the case of Frenchmen; the Legion in the case of foreigners. Peter had heard and read much of the famous regiments. He had received news not long since that Mae was engaged to be married, that printed invitations had been sent out. More than any other reason, the eternal restless streak abiding in all men who are physically well impelled him to enter and ask for information.

The cogs gripped him. He could not back out gracefully. In fact he had no sincere wish to draw back. In a very short while he had placed a signature at the bottom of his contract with France: *Edouard Maguil,* the scribe's rendition of his name, a name that floated up from the past, fitting the vague face of a boyhood friend he had liked.

Recruit Edouard Maguil—one meter eighty-two centimeters tall; chest girth one meter one, ten centimeters over the required ratio for his height; weight seventy-nine kilos point zero three five—was given a slip to assure his food and lodgings until he reached the Legion. He scribbled a note to his grandfather, another to his uncle in New York.

He traveled deck across the Mediterranean with other men headed for the same destination. Then in the cool mist of early morning a high hill crested with the yellow brown walls of a squat fortress loomed above him. Under the brilliant sun a white city appeared, flung against the steep slopes climbing to the metallic blue sky.

Oran, gateway of Africa.

Before the Transatlantique's docks, Maguil was lined up with the other recruits. Between the piles of crates and the long rows of barrels on the flat stretch of the port, a swarm of men had stirred before his eyes—nervous Frenchmen, casual Spaniards, idlers, sailors. Then the roll call, the names growing familiar, down to the end of the long list, Zukerieff, answered by a human wreck whose sack clothing was tied together with string and wire.

An endless climb toward the city proper. Heavy carts drawn by mules or horses, piloted by swarthy men in black tams and blouses wielding long whips freely. Old fashioned trams towing open carts laden with Spanish women in somber clothing, with native women veiled in bed sheeting, a lone black eye peeping between the folds. Palm trees and sharp black shadows. On the left as one emerged into the first street, the vast terrace of a big café.

A brief stay in the little depot of the Legion near the Oran station, then the railroad trip to Sidi-bel-Abbes. A chugging crawl through brown hills, covered with sparse bushes like the wool of mangy sheep. Vineyards, unrolling their green leafy carpet, flitting by.

"Bel-Abbes, Bel-Abbes—"

Another roll call, new sergeants, the march down the tree bordered road, the straight streets of the little city—the grilled gate of the Legion barracks. Training—while already new goals scattered along the weary trail of those eighteen hundred days looming in the future; days of sunlight and blood, of jungles and strange cities. Training, training—Saida, Gerryville, Ain Saffra.

Then the redoubt of El-Sherr.

EL - SHERR means hunger. Stark brown hillocks spreading under a cloudless sky. Low barracks. Simmering heat during the day; crackling cold during the night. To nomads of the Sahara, El-Sherr was within the fertile belt and they would have laughed to hear it called desert. To Maguil, who came from a land "where water holes are frequently encountered", El-Sherr was the real *bled.*

Months of monotony, broken now and then by a patrol. Ten miles from El-Sherr Maguil heard his first bullet during a brush with Berber raiders. He had pleased his section commander and was promised the next vacancy as corporal.

Aside from the telegraph poles, one thing worried him now. Mail was not frequent for the privates at El-Sherr. A courier came once a month; that was all. With Maguil, New York to the Sahara, *via* France, multiplied by the unavoidable delays in transmissions from one Legion unit to another . . .

"One hundred and nine; one hundred and eight—"

He stiffened under the combined weight of pack and rifle and his brain seemed to separate bruskly from his body. Mentally he was alert, keen. He turned his head and smiled distantly at the two friends who, after the transfers and shifts of many months, remained from the draft of recruits he had joined in Marseilles—Old Man Gallois and Fernando Cordova.

"One hundred and seven," clicked his counting mind. "She was only to blame through my own stupidity," the other mind reasoned.

A sharp whistle split the air. Lieutenant Pavert's hand uplifted.

"Ten minutes halt—"

The men slumped where the signal found them, breathless. Pavert, miraculously energetic, all nerves and muscles, passed down the ranks of the section.

"You're doing well—fine—no one dropped out. We'll join the column as agreed, ahead of time. They need us of the Legion to back up the infantry companies. The next halt is the end. Don't drain your canteens yet." He halted near Maguil. "Well, youngster, how goes it?"

"Not too well, *mon Lieutenant.*"

"Stiff—tired?" Pavert tapped his shoulder. "It's the trade sinking in. One gets used to it. After this you're a real Legionnaire."

He passed on.

Maguil strove for lucid reasoning. He had no exaggerated opinion of himself and was aware that the lieutenant's personal question showed that he must look pretty well fagged out. Even more than Shultz or Brocanti at his side, and they did not seem extremely fresh.

Another hour. A hundred poles more.

He could last. He would not be the first to drop. March or croak; the Legion was needed ahead. For the first time Maguil felt on an equal basis with the veterans. The trade sinking in—

A whistle.

And the telegraph poles, stiff, merciless, like mutilated crosses on which they were all crucified.

MORNING found Maguil stiff but less worn out than he had expected to be.

The section had camped near the column—two companies of Senegalese Tirailleurs, two of Tunisian Tirailleurs, a section of sixty-five millimeter cannon, a platoon of regular cavalry, Spahis, and a swarm of *goumiers, mokhazenis*-irregulars in French service.

Among the blacks there were types akin to those in the States, grinning, happy fellows. But the majority were lean limbed, chocolate colored, broad shouldered, with serious faces made fierce by long tribal scars on the cheeks. The infantrymen—Arabs in uniform.

In Ain Saffra he had once seen Lieutenant-Colonel Marnier de Beau-Rivage, a handsome officer, tall and strong, excellent horseman, two years under fifty.

Maguil gleaned news from the orderlies near the headquarters tent.

"What's happening? Are we bound for Ksar-el-Asrar?"

"No less. I guess this means business."

Ksar-el-Asrar was about a hundred kilometers south, the nearest stronghold as yet independent. A numerous *harka*—raiding corps armed for combat—was making its present base there with the complicity of the *kaid*, an old time Moroccan unfriendly to the Protectorate. Beau-Rivage meant to arrive there in time to smash the *harka* while in formation and assure quiet in the region for many months to come.

Sharp whistles sent the men running back to their units. The time to go forward had arrived. Senegalese and Tunisians started out in columns of threes. The blacks strolled, many with the rifle across the neck and shoulders, one hand on the muzzle, the other on the stock. The Tunisians slithered off at a shambling, tireless pace, their khaki procession tipped with red *chéchias*, dotted by the high silhouettes of mounted officers, white helmeted with backs barred by revolver straps.

For the next three days the pace was not severe. Pack mules carried water; others carried men who might fall out. The column had swerved from the telegraph line and the *hammada*, showing its bosom of red stone in the rifts of sand, spread like a shiny wheel under the sun.

Gossip was seeping through the ranks. Officers had been overheard talking together, a scribe had been indiscreet and imagination worked at full speed.

"This is one of two columns. Ours goes straight; the other, under a major, swings north a bit, converging toward the fortress at El-Asrar. We'll be two thousand five hundred at most against eight to ten thousand of those birds."

Detachments of riders arrived, departed again. Three or four times big planes passed overhead, planes from the base at Bou-Denib, which covered, in less than an hour, the distance that absorbed three or four days of marching.

After a short march on the morning of the third day, Maguil discovered the green mass of foliage of the oasis surrounding Ksar-el-Asrar, and in intervals between clumps of trees, the brown walls of the various *kasbahs*, native fortresses forming the defense. Despite his short military experience, he knew that even with the help of the little cannon, crouching ready between the stunted wheels, the emplacement would prove a hard nut to crack.

De Beau-Rivage was not one to delay long. The other column was not yet in sight, but he evidently felt confident it would arrive soon, or perhaps did not believe the obstacle as formidable as it appeared.

The guns occupied the crest of several high dunes to the southeast of the oasis and opened fire. Shells bloomed prettily over the crumbling walls surrounding the palm grove, while Senegalese and Tunisian Tirailleurs moved to attack positions in widely spaced combat groups. The Legion section followed, not expected because of its numerical weakness to do more than support the onrush of the native infantry.

For once, Legionnaires would form the rear, the reserve.

There was the vicious humming which Maguil had heard once before. It was as if invisible violin strings, extremely tenuous and extremely long, had been stretched shoulder high across the field and were being teased by the stiff fingers of an unskilled musician.

Ping—ing—ing! Then a long purring drone, dying away.

The lieutenant-colonel was some distance to the rear of the Legion, mounted on a beautiful chestnut horse, whose sleek coat shone in the sunlight. He was the very personification of courage and leadership. This was his very own battle, his chance to bite off, chew and swallow a rather large mouthful—Ksar-el-Asrar. Maguil turned from him to watch the Senegalese, the red skullcaps and khaki backs vanishing over the walls. That they were not idle was amply attested by the firing and shouting in the grove.

Several Legionnaires, sent back to fill canteens at the mule lines, returned. Gallois, who was with them, ran to Maguil, pressed something white into his hand.

"The last plane dropped a sack. Some of our mail was with it. This is for you."

"A letter?"

"Yes. From America."

Maguil nodded, wordless. This was his first letter in several months. He twisted the envelope in his fingers and his eyes blurred when he saw the familiar rugged mask of Roosevelt on the stamp. The postmark bore "Wall Street Station" and the date was seven weeks old.

Mr. Edouard Maguil,
Soldat de 2ème classe,
1er Régiment Étranger,
Sidi-bel-Abbes, Algeria.

The address was typewritten. Many notations in longhand covered the envelope:

> Second section, 3rd Company, Battalion at Ain Saffra. See depot company at Bou-Denib. Deceased in hospital. Send to El-Sherr via Bou-Denib.

He tore open the end of the envelope and the edges of the letter were in sight.

"*En avant*—deploy in groups!" Pavert called.

Maguil rose obediently, the letter clutched in his left hand against the rifle. On his right one of his comrades seemed to drop into a hole in the ground. Maguil half turned, saw there was no hole. The man had been hit and his legs had folded beneath him.

"Volley fire," Pavert warned. "Watch out for the command!"

There was no need to change the sights, blocked at three hundred meters. In any case, these volleys were chiefly for moral effect. Maguil shouldered his rifle, pressed the trigger at the word. A quick twist of the right wrist slid a cartridge into the chamber to replace the empty, which snapped back in a pretty, curving flash of brass. The letter was still caught between his sweating fingers and the wood of the rifle.

"Halt. Lie down."

No more orders to fire. The stone wall was not far distant and, to judge from the confusion on the other side, the Senegalese had stumbled on a horde of Tartars. Maguil slipped the sheets from the envelope, which dropped unheeded to the sand. He read:

> Dear Mr. Kempton:

identifying himself with an effort as the person thus ceremoniously addressed:

> Your uncle, Mr. Kilpatrick, has asked me to write you. You have never met me. I am his wife's second cousin. Your uncle is now in St. Luke's recovering from an operation for tonsils. So, as I have known all about you, he asked me to write you instead. This is my lunch hour in the office and I must tell you it is a real thrill to be writing to some one *really* in the Foreign Legion. Is it as interesting as the books make it? I saw you once, years ago, when I was a very little girl, at a party, and I feel I know you. It seems rather queer to think of you riding on camels and fighting Arabs . . .

"*En avant!*"

The crumpled letter met the rifle again and Maguil walked forward. Silly kid. He remembered her vaguely now. Riding on camels— Oh, the affair was not going at all well. The Senegalese were coming back, and coming back a little too fast for good taste. Broken? Not quite. They had lost sight of their officers and without them did not care to mix on even terms with the warriors of the *harka* defending the grove. A lieutenant emerged from nowhere and cuffed the nearest pair. They turned back meekly and the rest whirled with them like sheep, into the fight again.

The section of the Legion took cover against the stone wall, which was not nearly so thick, so high or so solid as it had appeared. From the shouts exchanged between Pavert and the sergeants Maguil understood that he would have time to finish his letter before the next surge onward. The section was to stay where it was until another section of Tunisian Tirailleurs penetrated at an angle on the left.

> . . . fighting Arabs or whatever it is you fight. But you are not interested in me and you want news. Your uncle says to tell you that Ferdy was tried and condemned to death. He is to be executed in August, week of the fifteenth, at Trenton. He is trying to make an appeal, but no one believes it will be granted. The men who killed Mr. Kempton have been arrested and will be tried soon. Your uncle says that it would be all right for you to come back, that the whole gang is cleaned out. There were seventeen of them.
>
> Five took part in your father's murder and I hope they get electrocuted, even though I do not approve of capital punishment. Your uncle also wants you to know that your friends on Washington Heights are well, but that the daughter did not get married. He wants to know if you want her to have your address. She called up the garage several times. The manager will send you a statement soon. He sold your old car for four hundred dollars. I don't want to bother you, but it would please me very much if you would send me postal cards. Your aunt and uncle ask to be remembered to you.
>
> Very sincerely yours,
>
> —PEARL CONKLIN

"Postal cards."

Maguil grinned and looked for the address. On the envelope, somewhere behind. Too bad, and Mae was not married, was asking for him. He did not know whether he was elated or depressed.

He was seated with his back to the wall, knees hunched up. Around him, probably seeking out the tip of his *képi*, bullets chipped the dry stones or vibrated high.

"Good news?" Pavert asked, smiling.

"Rather good, Lieutenant."

"Sorry you won't have time to reply to that letter as you read it. Unless I'm mistaken, we'll have to earn the Republic's soup today."

He lifted his whistle to his lips, looked around, then with a quick gesture completed the move. Several short blasts resounded. The men rose.

"*En avant!*"

They scaled the wall according to temperament and agility, slowly or with a leap. Beyond, the soil was loose and one sank to the ankles. In the vegetation could be distinguished the brown clods that had been Tirailleurs.

Maguil looked to right and left. A long line of khaki and white *képis*, steel bristling forward. This line, parted into small groups before palm boles, swerved and bounded, crossing the shallow irrigation ditches disposed in a network throughout the grove. Each ditch was turned into an improvised trench by the defenders.

"Easy, easy," Maguil mumbled, as a swarm of yellow, brown, white *jellabas* spurted from cover close by. Bearded, baked faces twisted with rage and fear, with spittle-flecked chins and cheeks, blazing eyes and open mouths.

The point, recover, the butt—that was not difficult—and one man was gone. A second, armed with a long, broad blade, ducked the bayonet, slid along the rifle but missed his own lunge. Maguil brought up his knee and the warrior bent and reeled away. A half turn to the right, a stiffening of the arms, and the thin four-edged blade sped true.

Three yards away Lieutenant Pavert slashed a man across the face with his cane, then used his revolver. The man rolled on the ground. The officer turned quickly, instinctively. The fallen man had risen, blade ready. Three strides in a tenth of a second and Maguil was there with a kick and a lunge.

Pavert smiled and gave the order again—

"*En avant!*"

In the palm grove, cut by the ditches, on loose soil, the advantage usually held by disciplined troops over native hordes vanished. Nothing is so disturbing to free evolutions as a forest. The combat was splitting into a series of individual encounters, in which, while the Legion held more than its own, Senegalese and Tunisians did not always win out.

Despite fifty years of contact with Europeans, the blacks held in the bottom of their hearts an ancestral terror of the lean, brown, wiry men who had raided the hut villages on the banks of the Senegal and the Niger. The Moroccans knew this and applied themselves to picking off the white leaders. The Senegalese broke and flooded back.

Pavert's section charged through them, bayonets low, caught their attackers like a whirlwind sweeping an oat field, threw them aside in disorder. The negroes reformed in the quiet zone left behind the advancing Legionnaires.

The lieutenant had been hit in the left shoulder. His arm was dangling. A quickly born dread that his men might fail to achieve their appointed task paled his face, lighted a mad, dancing flame in his eyes.

That flame was contagious, kindled a like flame in each man. Each man then became two men, three men, the number needed to meet the emergency. In the cool shade of the grove, on the patchwork of streaming sunlight and shadow, hand to hand fights took place, little epic struggles in which fists, feet, teeth, nails came into play.

The majority of the Legionnaires were veterans of the World War—on one side or the other. The killing did not sweep them, as it did Maguil, with an appalling sensation of insanity and nervous exaltation. His coat was in tatters, his boots scratched and lacerated. Blood had dripped from the gutters of his bayonet down the barrel of his gun, oozed greasily on his fingers.

"*En avant!*"

Sergeant Raplan, a big, handsome blond man, who played the accordion superbly, had lost an ear. Corporal Drapic was nude from neck to hips, save for the straps supporting his military belt. He laughed loudly, as a horse neighs.

Few had been killed as yet, for Legionnaires are hard to kill. It was not from this day that foes would know them as "they who must be killed twice".

The front of the section was soon free of enemies and the Senegalese were sweeping right and left, shrilling the Sudanese call:

"*Fara! Fara! Fara!*"

They had located what was left of their officers. A pretty little lieutenant of the staff—Maguil knew from the collar insignia—arrived and spoke to Pavert excitedly. Maguil, prone in the grass three feet away, drawing breath, could hear plainly.

"Colonel says we must get them in the open, push them through the grove. Straight ahead—"

"According to the plan," Pavert replied, "straight ahead brings us under fire of their western fortlet. Better push toward the left."

"Yes, yes. But you are wounded, Lieutenant?"

"Not enough to matter. Try and stop the Senegalese from fighting their way into the lion's mouth. They fight by fits and starts—but when they do fight—"

"We'll detach a couple of machine guns to follow you."

"Yes." Pavert nodded. "Now is it left?"

"Left," the staff officer agreed.

"Bear on the left. *En avant, la Légion!*" Pavert shouted.

The section swung left and scrubbed the grove like a steel rake. Sergeant Raplan went down under a cluster of attackers. Adjutant Frappa had also vanished. Drapic took charge of the group in which Maguil fought. Pavert had caught another blow in the face, which had marred his nose and draped a shred of lip on his chin. But the open sand was in sight, crowded with the warriors of the *harka*, too numerous to find a haven within the walls. Every bullet struck in that dense mass, while the small shells of the 65's hashed busily.

Above the brownish, loopholed walls of the residence buildings and the caravan shelter, the jagged rim of the eastern fortlet could be distinguished, its inner clay yellow and bright. Geysers bloomed within, each one with a shell at its root. On the fringe of the grove Legionnaires, Senegalese and Tunisians halted and fired volleys into the mob.

Desperately the Moroccans counterattacked.

Pavert and his handful of men managed to hold their ground against the wave of assailants, true to tradition. No retreat without an order. The staff men reappeared, gave the order and the retreat through the grove started, more dangerous than the advance had been.

Maguil used his cartridges sparingly. He had twenty left. Dodging from trunk to trunk, he turned to fend off blows. Fresh Moroccans, with loaded carbines, appeared on the scene, stood back from the panting, half spent, lacerated first line, picked off their men quietly. The big Martini bullets, large as the joint of a man's finger, smacked into flesh, tore ligaments and muscles, blasted bones. One shattered the stock of Maguil's rifle, glanced upward and lifted his *képi* from his head.

"Fool thing to get killed now," he thought.

His brain was clearing. He no longer acted automatically as a man in a dream. As no one else was running, he steeled himself and stayed on with his formation. Pavert, unlucky that afternoon, had been hit for the third time, and his remaining arm was useless. Maguil heeded Corporal Drapic's order and made a shield of his body before the lieutenant, while another man came to help.

Maguil, glancing down to select a rifle, saw, emerging from a heap of fallen, Sergeant Raplan's face, eyes fastened on his own. A steady, lasting glance which assured Maguil that death was not to be feared.

"Where's the wall? Where's the wall?" voices were asking.

They all dreaded to become lost among the trees, feared massacre before reaching the open. Behind Maguil Pavert had at last slumped down. Corporal Drapic looked about quickly, saw no sergeants standing, and assumed command. Swiftly he had realized that these first shouts preluded a panic, and he called the survivors together. No use keeping open formation.

"Never mind the wall," he said. "We stay here. For good; that's understood. But we'll collect in advance for our hides."

Then they saw with astonishment that there was no enemy before them now. The grove had emptied of Moroccans like a burst barrel of water. Emptied of all save the Legionnaires and the dead. The doves which had been flying above the trees settled on the branches, cooed reproachfully. Through the sylvan stillness distant volleys resounded.

Maguil understood as swiftly as any one. The expected column had arrived and was relieving the pressure by attacking the forts. Full salvation or a reprieve? Fresh men were now streaming through the grove. Tirailleurs with automatic rifle teams. The hammering of those weapons echoed from the rims of the oasis, bugles sounded on all sides. The lieutenant-colonel appeared, and Maguil felt safe.

"Fine work, Lieutenant Pavert, fine work."

"Thanks, Colonel," the lieutenant answered, his voice gurgling through mangled lips, "and we were supposed to be a support section. Most of these men haven't been in service a year. Something should be done—"

"Send me a report," Beau-Rivage agreed. "I'll give it a push. And I shall not forget you. You shall be treated justly. If I had had a full battalion of your corps matters would have been different."

The commander saluted and rode away.

Maguil turned, attracted by excited voices. Corporal Drapic had dropped dead, dead without wounds, from fatigue and strain. But, over there, shouts hailed the hoisting of the flag over the main *kasbah* of Ksar-el-Asrar.

CHAPTER II

THE GIRL

SIX MONTHS after the charge through the palm grove, a regimental decision was posted in Bel-Abbes.

Maguil read his own name, following those of Pavert, Replan, Frappa, Dupic and other comrades fallen in the action, almost forgotten, names that evoked faces once well known and struck the ear with a sad, funereal peal.

> "Maguil—Legionnaire. At the storming of Ksar-el-Asrar conducted himself with superb courage and calm. Formed a shield with his body for his wounded chief."

The battalion formed in the big courtyard soon afterward and Maguil presented arms with the rest amid a ruffling of drums and a ringing of bugles. A bearded, tanned face, sharp eyes stabbing into his own, a flutter of hands near his heart, a quick handshake and it was over. The Colonial ribbon was also given the survivors. Maguil was honestly astonished. He had leaped before Pavert at the gesture of Corporal Drapic, who did not joke when on duty and who would have shot him had he hesitated.

Nevertheless, when he returned to the cot he brought out his shaving mirror. The bronze Colonial War Cross hung on the scarlet and sky blue ribbon dotted by a star; the blue and white of the Colonial Medal at its side improved his breast also. These would distinguish him, on the boulevard, from the green recruits.

Now he wore the big *capote* with ease. His torso emerged like a V from the tightly rolled blue sash, his puttees were wound neatly, his buttons shone. His elegance was such that the buxom Spanish maids strolling at twilight on the Boulevard de la République, who seldom look at a Legionnaire, occasionally glanced twice toward him.

He had long since become acquainted with the other amusements of the true private of the Foreign Regiment—the Moulin Rouge, a big thriving establishment in the negro village, where sometimes bottles flew merrily and patrols beat on the locked portals with frantic gun butts. When he was refused permission to go to town and had reason to wish to go, he would hop the surrounding wall as all Legionnaires learn to do.

The weeks slid by eventlessly in the round of drilling, loafing, strolling. His name was up for the corporal's instruction platoon.

The veteran Legionnaire, Gallois, who had been his particular friend, was seldom to be seen. Occasionally, when he was broke, he appeared to borrow money. It was a standing joke at the barracks that Gallois' prison cells should be reserved. While in garrison he was never sober. The eight hours of drill with full pack, punishment for stubborn offenders, held no terror for him. And his chiefs, who knew his worth in action, could never bring themselves to send him down to Colomb-Bechar where the disciplinary company was stationed.

Fernando Cordova, who spoke English rather well, was Maguil's most constant companion. He seemed well educated, had read a great deal and drank like a gentleman. The only thing against him, in Maguil's opinion, was his friendship with a big German, Hirschmann. The latter was the only sinister character in the big dormitory where Maguil slept with thirty-odd others.

Hirschmann had narrowly avoided the disciplinary section three times, being saved by his extreme caution when speaking to superiors. He had tried to become a terror to his comrades. An intercepted smile or a wink and he would bring his calloused knuckles and heavy shoes into action. Cordova, when the German menaced him, would merely draw his bayonet and wait.

Maguil was more or less versed in the science of uppercuts and hooks. He had not been able to knock out Hirschmann, but a few rattling punches on the jaw usually cleared the German's head. The first encounter was over before the others knew what the meaty smacks were about. After a third or fourth attempt to dominate the younger man, Hirschmann had a change of heart. Maguil thereafter often found his accouterments cleaned, his bayonet polished, while the German hovered near for approval.

Maguil's twenty-third month of the Legion was dragging to its end when one morning Cordova approached him with unusual diffidence.

"I beg your pardon, old man," he said

in English, "but may I ask a favor?"

"All right."

"Can you lend me a certain sum of money?"

Maguil was astounded. Cordova was by far the most prosperous member of the company. On the fifteenth of each month he received a postal money order amounting to one thousand two hundred and fifty francs. Sometimes a few francs more or less, which led Maguil to believe that he was receiving foreign money and the variation was due to the shifting of the exchange. In a land where a laborer may live and bring up children on one thousand francs a month, this was wealth for a soldier. True, Cordova spent a good deal, frequented the local dance palace, seldom entered by privates of the Legion.

"How much?" Maguil asked.

"Five hundred francs. Oh, I know it's a lot. But my money didn't come last month and hasn't come this month. I've been going on credit. Marianne, at the Dance Palace, threatens to report me. I need the other hundred to get to Oran on leave Saturday. From there I can cable, without—"

"Agreed," Maguil said.

He went to the company's office to speak with the scribe who had charge of his money. Despite the adage that Legionnaires do not steal from one another, loose bills are not safe under a man's pillow.

"How much have I left, Adjutant?"

"Six hundred and eighty francs, Maguil."

"I'll take them."

"Here." The non-com smiled at his own joke. "Going to leave us?"

"No. Helping out a friend."

"Beware of having too many such friends, Maguil."

Maguil took the money. It was the last of the sum he had taken from America with him. He decided that he would draft two hundred dollars from New York, which would take time on account of the confusion in names.

"Here's six hundred," he told Cordova. "That gives you margin."

"I won't forget this," Cordova promised. "Listen, Maguil, even if I should be missing sometime, don't worry about it. I have never broken my word to a man."

"You mean?"

"What I said and what you understand, Maguil."

IF CORDOVA meant to desert he showed no further signs and did not speak again during the next four days. Maguil found on his cot a copy of a British paper, which Cordova purchased regularly at the tiny shop off the Rue Proudon. Maguil scanned the columns, pleased to read something in his own language. Then he noticed that part of the paper was torn out, in a neat square.

Maguil had a normal amount of curiosity. Of all the men he had met in the Legion, Cordova was the most romantic and mysterious. He spoke French, Spanish, German and Russian fluently, English very well, although with an accent. His manners were refined, his mind alert and keen. He had joined the recruits at Lyons. Tall, slender, dark, garbed in an expensive suit. He had smoked cigarets from a gold case, wore fine shoes and silk socks. A bracelet of gold links had encircled his wrist. When he introduced himself he dropped his name as one drops a coin in a beggar's palm.

Deliberately he selected Maguil for his companion. At various times he referred to New York, Cleveland and other American cities. For that matter he mentioned Tokyo, Vienna and Lima just as casually. More than others, did he resent the scorn which the local well behaved young ladies felt for mere privates of the Legion.

"Conceited wenches. We wouldn't look at them when we were civilians," he said.

Maguil therefore struggled with his own curiosity. He saw Cordova on guard outside the little building housing the honor rooms of the corps. After a brief hesitation, Maguil went to the newspaper shop and came out with the British paper. He sat down on a bench in the palm shaded Place Carnot, near the kiosk where the band played on warm evenings.

On one side was an account of a railroad wreck in France. On the other the obituary of Colonel Sir Arthur Combrey, born in 1869. He had served under Kitchener in the Sudan, in the Boer War, had followed the Japanese army in Manchuria. During the World War he had distinguished himself at Mons, in the Dardanelles, and was wounded on the Somme in 1916, then assigned to India, after that the head of an exploration in Mongolia. He died in Switzerland of heart disease, leaving a wife and two sons who were in England.

Maguil, a plain private in the Legion, admired the strenuous life of Combrey. But what could Cordova have to do with him? In the railroad wreck one of the victims was an elderly German who had just returned from South America. Perhaps the answer was there.

Having failed in his quest, he grew ashamed of having thus probed into another man's business.

The sergeant at the gate halted him when he passed by.

"Your name's Maguil?"

"Yes."

"Pass at the office. Telegram for you."

"Thanks."

He entered the little office flanking the entrance on the right, clutching at a hundred suppositions in the space of five seconds. His uncle was dead? The garage had burned down?

The stocky little lieutenant handed him a blue envelope.

"Came an hour ago."

Maguil tore the paper open. It was from Oran.

EDOUARD MAGUIL,
SOLDAT PREMIER RÉGIMENT ÉTRANGER,
SIDI-BEL-ABBES.

ARRIVED ORAN THURSDAY STOP AM HÔTEL DU SUD STOP SHALL I COME OR CAN YOU STOP LOVE

—MAE GORDON

"Bad news, Legionnaire?" the lieutenant asked gently.

"No, Lieutenant! Good news, I guess—" Maguil stammered. "May I ask, Lieutenant, whether Lieutenant Pavert is in the barracks now?"

Pavert had recently returned, after a leave in France for convalescence, but was not in actual command of Maguil's company. However, Maguil knew that with his help he might obtain leave.

"No. He's at the Officers' Club."

Pavert came out immediately, on the heels of the orderly who had transmitted Maguil's request.

"What can I do for you, my lad?"

"A lady I knew back home is in Oran," Maguil explained breathlessly. "I don't know for how long. She wants to see me. I do not care to have her come down here because—"

"I understand," Pavert agreed.

"I received this telegram—" Maguil exhibited the blue paper—"a few minutes ago. I would like to leave for Oran tonight if possible. I feared a refusal and I came to see you, thinking you might help me."

"You did right, Maguil. Come along."

Pavert soon obtained the signed leave.

"Forty-eight hours' permission," he said. "That means you must be back at ten o'clock Sunday evening. Do you need money?"

"No, Lieutenant. Thank you."

Maguil put on his best uniform, made to measure of finer khaki than that supplied by the government, donned his best shoes, adjusted the roll puttees with precision. He was like a man in a dream. Before leaving the barracks he inspected himself in the great mirror which the good Legionnaire consults before leaving for town. Not bad at all, he decided, a genuine fashion plate for Legionnaires, leather belt snug over the wide blue sash, decorations—the little red and black *képi* perched rakishly above the tanned face.

He reached the station long before eight o'clock when the last train left for Oran. His eagerness grew as he paced the platform. Mae here in Algeria? By what miracle? He re-read the telegram a dozen times, became conscious of the name—Hôtel du Sud. A one story structure on the Boulevard Charlemagne; cheap rooms, cheap hotel. Not enjoying the best reputation. Surely, were she with her family, she would stay at the Grand or Continental. She must be alone. Crazy escapade. Girls could travel alone in America; not so well in Algeria.

He counted his money, one hundred and forty odd francs, and cursed his luck that he had loaned his last lump sum to Cordova. Then he recalled that Cordova was due for leave tonight also. He looked for him. They came together as the train entered the station and climbed into the same compartment. Cordova returned fifty francs which he said he could spare.

Hirschmann was along, and Maguil found time to wonder how he had obtained leave, with his bad record. The train started, and they whirled north, in the wagon that smelled of dust, coal and old clothing, of lunches wrapped in old paper and of wine.

"We're going to the dump on the Rue des Jardins," Cordova said. "I'm known there. Want to come along? They trust me and it won't cost you anything."

"No, thanks," Maguil said.

"I didn't know you had leave?"

"Decided quickly."

"Ah—" Cordova said.

SHORTLY before eleven o'clock, the three Legionnaires moved out of the station with the crowd of travelers, Spanish and French, dotted here and there by the clear khaki of a uniform or the red cloak of a native cavalryman. There were several hotel buses waiting, but the Hôtel du Sud was not represented.

"I'll treat you to a taxi, Maguil—" Cordova smiled— "on your own money. Where do you wish to be dropped?"

"By the clock on the Boulevard Seguin."

They piled into a rickety taxi, Cordova and Maguil on the rear seat, Hirschmann meekly poised on the folding stool. The driver shifted gears and they hurled away, pulled by the snarling motor.

"Hirschmann has no leave, so don't mention him to any one that you chance to meet from Bel-Abbes," Cordova explained.

"All right," Maguil agreed.

The taxi turned at mad speed down the Boulevard du Deuxième Zouaves and, after sliding a few yards along the incline, whirled right and halted abruptly with a grinding of brakes and a terrific jolt, at the sidewalk opposite the two-dial clock cresting the bronze standard in front of the Café Riche. A few customers, belated and bored, sat at the small tables before foaming beer.

"Where can we see each other again in Oran?" Cordova asked.

"Tomorrow, around the Place d'Armes. Good night."

Maguil heard Cordova give the new destination to the chauffeur in clear, loud tones, and the car resumed its bold path into the city.

Fifty seconds later he stopped, breathless, before the Hôtel du Sud. He felt abashed, self-conscious, nervous. His uniform seemed a masquerade. He brushed his short cropped hair with his palm, hitched his belt a notch tighter. Then he climbed the three worn steps to the hall, halted before the tiny desk, deserted at this time of night. He called out, thumped his fist against the wood and a fat woman appeared, squeezing through a narrow door.

"What do you want? We rent no rooms to Legionnaires."

"No joke, mamma!" Maguil grinned. "I am a visitor. Is Mademoiselle Gordon registered here?"

"You want to see the American?"

"No one else—"

"You'll only get sent packing for your pains," she warned him.

"She's expecting me." Maguil showed her the telegram.

"That's another pair of sleeves. Room 10, on your right when you reach the landing," the old woman mumbled loud enough to be overheard. "Turns up her nose at everything, and then has a Legionnaire for a friend! Those foreigners!"

Maguil ran up, his heavy soles thumping on the risers. He turned right along the tiled floor and in the weak light of the small electric bulb, shaded by a procelain disk, he distinguished the room number. He lifted his hand three times before daring to knock, then brought his knuckles down hard on the panel.

"What is it?" some one asked in English, then hastily repeated the question in bad French.

It was Mae's voice and Maguil remained petrified for seconds, tongue clinging to his palate. Those inflections, so well remembered, seemed to wipe out the past and hurtle him back through two years. The voice resumed—

"Telegraph?"

"*Oui*," Maguil agreed, smiling.

A light step across the floor, a key twisted twice in the lock; the gray painted door swung open. Mae was framed by the stronger light within and all Maguil could see at first was her silhouette and the sheen of her blond hair.

"Peter!"

She clung to him, kissed him, ran one hand gently over his face. A queer sense of unreality swept him. His emotion on the way up had been curiosity, elation, and now he struggled with unspoken, fervent words.

"Eh," he articulated at last. "Some one might see us. Let's go in."

Mae led him in and closed the door. Maguil looked at her, dazzled. She was more beautiful than he remembered her; there was a new and intriguing sharpness to her small chin. Her glance was deeper. She seemed more at ease than he, calmer, probably because she had visioned this meeting longer.

He looked about. A very small, rectangular room, tiled floor. A metal bed, a closet with glass doors, a washstand on which were enthroned pitcher and enameled basin. A cheap room, eight to ten francs a day.

"You are in Oran alone?" he asked bruskly.

"Yes."

"How did you get here?"

"On a boat, obviously."

"But in here, in this dump?"

"It's clean, isn't it?" She touched the medals on his chest. "What are those? Swimming?"

"War Cross—Colonial Medal," he explained.

"You wonderful boy. Sit down."

She waited until he occupied the only chair in the room, then sat on the bed, swinging slender legs clad in sheer silk stockings. The daintiness of her feet and hands, the healthy glow of her cheeks, amazed him. It was years since he had been permitted to approach a girl like this, let alone speak with her or kiss her.

"Say, Pete, you don't seem so happy over my getting here!"

"I'm worried, naturally. This is no place for a girl alone."

"Silly," she proclaimed, taking the *képi* from his head and tossing it aside.

"Thank you," he said.

"They make you awfully polite in the Legion," she pointed out.

"No, but I'm not used to being with girls any more."

"Sure?"

"Girls like you, anyway," he explained. "Privates in the Legion are seldom invited to balls, you know!"

He grew more confident as he spoke, crossed his legs, lighted a cigaret. He was annoyed when she helped herself from the package. His enforced associations had made him very proper when in good company.

"Makes you look tough," he said.

"Say, where have you been?" Mae laughed.

"In the Legion," he announced. "But tell me how you got here, will you? Your telegram sure took the wind out of me. I got it around five and got leave right off."

"Well, Peter, after you vanished I got tangled up with Paul. You remember Paul? Nice fellow, but sort of a flat tire when you get to know him. Has an idea every other Thursday. Father was keen about him. He's thirty and he pulls down a hundred and twenty a week. That made a big row at home, so I packed and left. Got a good position with a travel bureau—not much work to do and loads of personality required. Meanwhile I kept thinking of you, wondering what had happened to you. Your manager at the garage tried to flirt with me, then turned me down cold. I got your uncle's address and pestered him. Finally he gave in and told me you were in the Legion. That sounded romantic.

"I thought of writing you, but that's not much satisfaction. So I started to look around for a chance to get here, played nice with all the old dames who came to the tourist agency I slaved in. Finally, I got a fine prospect for a free trip—a sweet old maid with the disposition and sex appeal of a meat grinder. Wears sensible shoes, wool stockings and speaks French so that only head waiters can get it. Her heartless companion had left her to get married—some persons have no loyalty—and she needed a new one. I had just reached my twenty-first birthday, was white and unmarried. I went up to kiss mother goodby and sailed.

"We went to Cherbourg on a British liner. Don't worry, I had no chance to be frivolous. But I knew what I had in mind and bore up well. Paris was sort of fun. Finally we reached Marseilles and crossed to Oran. She's been to Morocco already and wanted to do the coast from here to Egypt. Yesterday I wanted to leave her long enough to send a telegram to you and she wouldn't let me. When I told her what for she said she would not permit me to see men alone. We had a scrap. To end with I fired myself—before thinking I got an advance of salary in Paris for clothes—and had none coming to me. She went on to Algiers alone. I telegraphed you. And here we are!"

"And how long are you going to stay?" Maguil inquired.

"Stay? Say, you don't want me to propose to you?"

"You mean get married—here?" He lifted his hands in genuine horror. "That's out."

"You don't love me?" she asked.

"I don't know—"

"This is cheerful!" Mae tried to carry off the situation flippantly, but was near tears.

MAGUIL took her hands in his.

"Listen," he said. "You're the most beautiful thing I've laid eyes on in a couple of years. For me, you're not a girl—but a sort of angel that comes down from a heaven called New York. I worship you, I admire you, but I don't know whether I love you. At present, any girl who hasn't crosses tattooed on her cheeks, or inscriptions in blue ink on her arms 'To my lover for life' looks good. There was a time in New York when I was in love with you. Then I heard you were getting married, and that didn't help. Funny what a lot of faults you can find in a girl that picks the other fellow. Don't cry, now—"

"Well — put yourself — in — my— place—"

"Now, listen, and forget all that rot you heard about the Legion. It's romantic from New York—I'll say that. But here, one of us heroes can't always get a room even with money in his pocket. In Bel-Abbes, the fattest, dirtiest little Spanish wench would hesitate to walk down the street on my arm. She might be seen, and good girls are not seen with Legionnaires. There's some reason on their side, I'll grant that. The noblemen in disguise and the millionaires out for adventure are scarce among us. We all got in some mess, material or mental, and came here. And if a good girl won't be seen walking with a private of the Legion, what is thought of a girl who marries one?"

"What do I care what people think?"

"A hell of a lot!" Maguil nodded sagely. "You're a soft kid, nicely brought up and all that. Well, I have known Legionnaires to feel the scorn that cheap people hold for them so keenly that they got drunk to forget it—and they're hard boiled men. As for myself, I've known days—nights—when I felt like going to some fat Spaniard, or some superior French employee, to tell him that back home I have a business that brings in more in a day than he makes in a month. That's childish. But you get that way."

"I'll chance it."

Maguil stared at her steadily.

"God knows how long I can go on arguing against myself," he resumed. "I've changed a lot—inside more than outside. Seeing you has made me reason as I would have years ago. You get what I mean?"

"I'm not a kid." She nodded.

"Now, how much money have you?"

"About fifty dollars."

"One thousand two hundred and fifty francs—that won't last you long. Eight francs for room, forty for food, say fifty a day for just living." Maguil nodded again, thoughtfully. "I must get you out of here. Know what you'll do? Take the train tomorrow for Algiers, go and meet your boss and go on with her."

"And what about you? When will I see you again?"

"In about three years, when my term is finished."

"Lord!"

"Yes! That's what I say, too—but no one forced me to enlist."

"I'm not going back to Miss Drake—not after our quarrel."

"Then you're going home, get me? Home." Maguil rose, paced the room restlessly. "You must get out of here. You don't know the life. You don't know what it means! Suppose I get funds from the garage to support you here, marry you—what sort of life will you have? Who can you mix with? Wives of Legion non-coms? They're not invariably selected ladies, by any means. You don't speak French."

"A little—"

"Say *none*," he grumbled. "Let's be frank about it. The worse of it, you're too pretty, too nice to look at. Anywhere you lived as my wife, you'd make me enemies. A private can not have a pretty wife. Not without ending in the penal camps, or wishing he was there. You can't understand—and even if all went well, if some sergeant, even some officer, didn't take a fancy to you and a corresponding dislike to me, I might be transferred to some blockhouse in the Atlas where you couldn't follow. Or to the Tonkin—wife in first class, husband deck— Bah! Don't be a fool!"

"I was a fool, wasn't I?" she asked weakly.

"Not your fault. New country to you. I had sappy ideas about the Legion myself." Maguil halted before her. grasped her shoulders in his iron fingers. The flesh seemed absurdly soft beneath the silk. "Listen—I—I—what the hell can I say?"

He pushed her away bruskly, sat down and smoked a long while in silence. At last, he spoke, in a calmer voice—

"Will your father send you money to get back?"

"I don't know. I'm not going to ask him."

"And you won't go back to Miss Drake?"

"No, never."

"You can rest more pride on a few hundred bucks than any one I've ever known," he said. "As for me, I'm broke, and it will take six days at least to get money around by cable."

"I wouldn't take your money," she said.

Absent-mindedly, in a natural gesture, Maguil reacted to the tone of defiance by raising his hand menacingly. Long months of Legion had not taught him utter gentleness. He saw fright in her eyes and laughed, embarrassed.

"No, that's just a gesture we have," he explained. "I wouldn't hit you for anything in the world! But you're so dumb. You throw yourself into this scrape and every way out you close before my nose. You've got to get out and you're going to get out by the earliest ship possible. I'll find a way to get you money, without humiliation. Don't see how it can be done yet."

"I thought you might be broke," Mae explained, in her turn, with a trace of pride, "and I have found something, this afternoon, to tide me over. That'll do until your cable gets around."

"What have you found?" he asked suspiciously. "You're not good as a stenographer here."

"There's a girl in the next room working at the California and she took me around to the manager."

Maguil looked at her closely to see if she was serious. The California was the center of night life in Oran, the most expensive dancing place in the Algerian province. Ship captains, aviation officers, prosperous traders visited the place. He controlled a first explosion, questioned patiently.

"What did he say?"

"He hires me to sing a song in English twice a night."

"And what will he pay you?"

"Thirty five francs a day."

"Better drop the idea."

"Why? I can take care of myself."

Maguil shrugged.

"With the men? Admitted. How many times have you fought in the past few years, Mae?"

"Fought?"

"In those dancing dumps there's jealousy. The performers—I'll use that word, anyway—are sent by an agency in France. One of them will be out of her turn, and that'll hurt her business back home, when the agency collects and finds she was laid off."

"I didn't know that," Mae said, almost in a whisper.

"But the girl knows it. She'll wait for you and bang you up a bit."

"The police—"

"Dance girls fighting. Both to the lockup pending investigation. Wouldn't cost you more than a few hours in jail and some strips of court plaster. Yes, Mae, the life is different. Right here in Oran, I once saw a girl with her nose bitten off. But don't let me stop you."

"I seem more and more foolish—"

"You should have written me. I would have explained all this by mail."

"I wished to surprise you."

"You did." Maguil glanced at his watch. "Getting late. I'll have to find a place to flop in. Don't worry, Mae, we'll get you out of this mess. In the Legion we always manage."

She halted him at the door, drew his head down to kiss him.

"I'll wait for you," she said.

"Three years," he reminded her. "I can't ask that."

"You'll see. I'll wait." She smiled steadily. "And after you come back and look prospects over and I still click—" she held his hand between her own. "You've been awfully nice to me, Peter, after my doing this foolish thing."

"That's one thing the Legion makes you understand—doing foolish things," he pointed out philosophically. "By the way, when you get home, don't talk too much about seeing me here. All the evil tongues do not wag in Africa."

"All right. See you tomorrow, then?"

"Yes. What time?"

"Nine o'clock, in the dining room."

The door closed and Legionnaire Maguil went down the steps slowly. Great loneliness swept over him. Three years. It was a long time. Mae had made him remember too many things, things he had forgotten to miss. His need for the Legion had passed; but the Legion still claimed him. A signature, a false name scrawled at the bottom of the sheet of paper—and he was bound. New York, marriage, a pleasant prospect indeed, but it must be earned. Before the hotel he halted, looked up at the streaks of light between the slats of the wooden blinds on Mae's window.

"I'm a damned fool," he concluded, without adding precisions.

HE ROSE the next morning without new plans. Yet he must have something to offer Mae at nine o'clock. He left the small hotel on the Rue Phillipe, went to a nearby café for breakfast. The sight of the telephone booth in the corner came as an inspiration: the American consul. The consulate was down near the port, in a zone where casual Legionnaires without special permission to go in the neighborhood of ships might be questioned by the police. But he could phone.

"Zero—eighteen," he called, after looking up the number.

A man's voice answered in French. Maguil, after trying English, used the same language, which was spoken with more facility by the person at the other end of the wire. Before Maguil stated his errand it was explained to him in full that the American consul was out of town, that even were he in Oran it was impossible for him to visé passports, that he was a British citizen anyway, occupied mainly, as American consular agent, in handling the business of American merchant vessels calling at Oran.

"But for anything else, I am at your service. I am the consul's second, and any service we can render an American citizen we will gladly give."

"Is there a vessel leaving for the States?"

"No. The next one comes in three weeks. But there is a cruise liner stopping in Algiers Monday, which will call at Gibraltar and Tangier, then go straight to New York."

"If an American citizen were stranded here without funds, could payment of passage be arranged upon arrival at New York?"

"I doubt it. We at the consulate would have to guarantee."

"The money would be paid in New York."

"Why not cable?"

"Time is too short."

"Please present yourself here this morning. We will discuss it more at ease."

"I am calling for a young American lady."

"Then she should come here. I understand you well? An American lady, destitute, here in Oran?" The voice was shaded with subtle surprise. "When did she arrive?"

"On the courier, day before yesterday."

"And she is out of work, without money? I am sorry, but I believe I should have to ask the consulate in Algiers for instructions. It might be better for her to call there in person. We must make sure that her passport is in order, investigate. Are you quite sure—" the voice grew ironical—"that you are calling for some one else?"

"Yes."

"All right, then. Come down. I shall wait for you here."

"It will be necessary for me—" Maguil thought rapidly.

Normally he would have taken the chance that he would be stopped and asked for written leave to be near the port. But in this case Lieutenant Pavert had obtained his leave of absence and he was reluctant to risk question or suspicion.

"You see, I am in the Legion."

"A Legionnaire? Are you over twenty-one?"

"What has that to do with it? Yes, I am."

"Then there's no use trying any tricks. An American citizen in the Legion can not expect assistance from his consul. Let the lady come here herself. I repeat, we shall do all within our power in case of legitimate distress."

"Thanks," Maguil concluded, hanging up.

There was little hope in that quarter. The consular agent would not take kindly to Mae's insistence that she would ask no help from Miss Drake, who was responsible for her arrival in Algeria. And the affair, made known through official circles, would be none too good for her reputation.

He left the booth and went back to his table.

"Maguil, eh, Maguil?"

Cordova, Hirschmann and a dapper young Frenchman in civilian clothes were seated before tall glasses of coffee. Maguil joined them. He was introduced to Raoul Desfarges. Desfarges was twenty-five or so, short, molded in a garish light brown suit, wore a felt hat that must have cost a hundred and twenty francs, carried a gold headed reed cane. His gloves were worn at the tips.

Cordova was manifestly downcast; Hirschmann was scowling.

"I may talk before this gentleman?" Desfarges asked.

"Yes."

"*Eh bien.* This man—" he indicated Hirschmann—"is much too heavy. Even the most willing to be deceived would guess his weight at ninety kilos at least. No, no, the deception is great, and I shall be the first sufferer, but it can not be done."

"What?" Maguil asked.

"You do not know?" Desfarges exclaimed.

"Not in the least," Cordova said.

"Oh, but you might be interested," Desfarges resumed, looking at Maguil with closer attention. "Can you box?"

"He—very good," Hirschmann said enthusiastically.

"But in no need of money, unluckily," Cordova said dryly.

"But the sport, the adventure!"

Desfarges beamed, crossed his legs. Maguil noticed that the soles were worn, that the pearl gray spats were frayed.

"What is your weight?"

"Seventy-eight kilos," Maguil answered.

"Fine. Do you wish to earn two thousand francs?"

Maguil could not believe his ears. With what Mae had left, what he could obtain by selling his watch and two thousand francs, the price of a second class passage could be made up. Mae was game and could be persuaded to accept the less comfortable quarters.

"What's your proposition?" he asked cautiously.

It was impossible, this streak of luck falling into his lap just when needed. A fervent belief in Providence was fast taking shape in his soul.

"I am a promoter, still very obscure. I promoted the big match at the Arenas in Eckmühl last July. You have seen lately, no doubt, the bills posted all over town advertising the twelve-round combat between the Oranese Hope, Emile Tamar, and the American, K.O. Morrison?"

"Yes."

"You've heard of Morrison?"

"Yes. I saw him fight when he was breaking in, in New York."

"You speak English? You know America?" Desfarges leaped into the air.

"I'm American—"

"Cordova, Cordova, what an ass you are—with this man up your sleeves all the time, and never realizing what you had!"

"I did," Cordova said, "but he did not need money."

"I explain, Mr. Maguil. Emile Tamar is a local light heavyweight. Rather good, has fought in Barcelona and Marseilles against men of good class. And won. I lost money on his last fight. He was undermatched. Three thousand francs or so. So he consented to sign for two thousand five hundred to give me a chance to make up. But there was no opponent who would draw a gate. As soon as a fighter becomes good enough, he goes to France. Then I saw a notice in the Algiers paper that James Morrison was in town, on a pleasure tour of North Africa with his manager. He has just knocked out a couple of British heavyweights in London.

"I knew he was an expensive man and I figured out my top figure, then wired his manager— 'Offering four thousand to fight Tamar.' I got a reply in a few hours—'Agreed. Half of purse, and expenses to Oran for three persons in advance.' Splendid. I went ahead with the advertising, sank my last savings into the match. Big posters, renting of the Olympia Hall, printing of tickets. A week ago, with all my preparations made, I wired two thousand five hundred francs to Morrison's manager. Then I received this telegram — 'Expenses arrived. Where's half of purse?' I leaped into the next train for Algiers.

"It seems that Morrison gets five to eight *thousand* a fight in the United States—*dollars!* He had believed, or so he said—I don't know, he seems a very humorous man—that I was quoting *dollars*. He had been willing to shave off a thousand or so because he knew his man could wipe out Tamar in a few punches. I told him I was wrecked if he didn't come. He is human after all, and after laughing awhile, he suggested that I get some one to impersonate Morrison, if I could. All he asked was that the news be kept out of the Paris papers. In any case, he would make a denial later—and I could say I was taken in myself by an impostor. Much as I dislike to fool my public, I am several thousand francs in debt. My credit will be ruined by another flop. And I have my family here and must face trouble. And the manager told me that such things are often done in the forests of America—"

Maguil smiled. Morrison's manager had doubtless tried to convey the expression "in the sticks" to the luckless promoter.

"What could I do? I took some newspaper men into my confidence. I had to locate a substitute and wrote Cordova, whom I know well, and with whom I have been on some neat little parties since he's coming on leave to Oran."

"Pass that—" Cordova said quietly.

"All right. He wired he had a man willing to take a beating. But he doesn't understand that boxing is run according to strict rules," Desfarges said with utter sincerity, despite his confessed tricks. "And a matter of ten kilos did not annoy him in the least. I told him a first time I couldn't use the big boy. I have since been down to the port to pick up a sailor. But could do nothing there. What do you say?"

"All right," Maguil agreed, "if Tamar will go easy."

"At the risk of losing you, I must be frank. Tamar is a conceited man, although he was badly frightened when he found himself matched with Morrison. I informed him of the substitute idea and asked him to let the man go awhile, to make a good show. He replied that, his reputation being at stake, he would be forced to do his best. Just a moment," Desfarges added hastily. "I'll fix that. I'll give you five hundred francs for each round after the first. You answer the bell for the third, and it's three thousand you get. My limit, however, is four thousand. I must save myself from absolute ruin. My ring tickets are sold out. Half the house is sold out. Our people want to see a fight and are not experts. They will be satisfied. Then I shall ask you to drop out of Oran for a few weeks."

"Listen," Maguil suggested, "here's what you can do and keep out of trouble. Change nothing on your program. When the main event is ready to go on, you step out and announce that Morrison has broken his hand in training, but that you have an American substitute for him with a good record back home. Say that money will be refunded at the gate to any one who wishes to leave. Tamar is a home town fighter and they'll guess that the stranger is in for a licking. They'll want to see an American take it on the chin for a change. No one will leave."

"Fine—fine," Desfarges agreed.

"One thing remains. I want my two thousand in advance."

"Don't you trust me?" Desfarges seemed hurt.

"Completely. But who knows what might happen?"

"I'll hand it to your friend here when you step into the ring." The young promoter indicated Cordova. "And if you last the other rounds I'll give him what I promised each time."

"Don't expect to pay too much," Maguil said grimly. "If Tamar is any good he'll flatten me in less than a round."

"You have not too much fat?" Desfarges asked anxiously.

Hirschmann laughed, tapped Maguil's chest with the flat of his hand.

"Wait, you see him!"

"Fine." Desfarges smiled jubilantly. "Now, Legionnaire, come with me. You can practise this afternoon."

"Bah! What would it do save tire me?"

"You swear to come?"

"Word of a Legionnaire," Maguil said. Desfarges paid the check, shook hands and left, swinging his cane.

"HIRSCHMANN," Cordova said, "if you don't want to be picked up by some wise cop, get out of sight. See you later."

The German lumbered away.

"He'll get eight days' prison for being absent without leave," Maguil said. "And if he stays with you tomorrow they may call it desertion."

"That's his business. He's no child," Cordova said. "Say, Maguil, when you get all that money can you lend me a thousand?"

"Sorry. I have use for it."

"Fed up, too?"

"Say, friend—" Maguil laid his hand on Cordova's shoulder—"I think both you and Hirschmann are playing with the idea of desertion. But think of the ten years waiting for you if you're caught."

"Men such as I are not caught," Cordova said. "And, good heavens, I can't stand this three years more. Even with money and such comforts as it brings, it's hell! You remember my hands? Look at them! Rifle drill, those damned trenches we dig in practise. And one doesn't come out of such places as the grove of El-Asrar twice! It's horrible to feel one's body coarsening day by day. Not to mention one's tastes. For instance, I bought this package of cigarets for sixteen francs fifty. They're not as good as I used to smoke. But now I prefer that vile brand we use, in the blue package—stains the teeth and makes your breath stink. For company, dancing girls—and those who do not even pretend to dance."

"No man is forced to enlist," Maguil said.

"No?" Cordova laughed bitterly. "And I am getting old, Maguil. Thirty-five."

"You don't look it," said Maguil sincerely.

"No, but I look five years older than when you first met me? You can't deny that, can you? I'll be near forty when I get out, coarsened beyond hope. Then what? Hunt a job as a night watchman or a porter? Live in a garret, eat in *bistros* and make love to charwomen and janitresses? I'd rather put my bayonet through my belly. I was something once."

"You don't get your money orders any more?"

"No. You can't milk a dead cow." Cordova shrugged. "If you can't help me, you can't. I'll pawn my cigaret case and my bracelet." He looked at Maguil for some moments. "I do believe you like it here!"

"Not always," Maguil said. "But I have the definite feeling that if I ducked my own acts now, I wouldn't think much of myself later. The Legion for a time supplied what I needed. It's up to me to pay my end of the bargain now."

"You're young — and years don't count."

"Perhaps so." Maguil looked at the clock above the bar and broke off. "I have a date at nine."

"With the American girl?" Cordova asked.

"Yes." Maguil looked up, startled.

"Oh, everything is known. Her neighbor at the hotel spoke to Mariette, who told me. An American girl who sends telegrams to a Legionnaire, your hasty leave—not hard to guess. Wish you joy."

"Don't think—" Maguil started to say.

Then he saw he would not be believed, and left, making an appointment for eight that evening, near the Olympia Hall.

"On time," Mae said, as he entered the dining room.

"Yes. Well, it's settled. You go to Algiers tomorrow, make straight for the consulate and have some one buy your ticket home. I'll give you the money in the morning."

"Couldn't I wait here a few days, see you again?"

"No," he said flatly. "Now, we might as well enjoy ourselves. I have about a hundred and twenty francs to spare this afternoon. We can take a nice taxi ride up to the Belvedere—finest view in Oran—then go to the Gambetta cliffs."

That afternoon lived long in Maguil's memory. From time to time he glanced down at his khaki uniform, fingered his sash, to force himself to the knowledge that there would be no tomorrow. He enjoyed being in the company of a girl from home, he reveled in the light banter, the comical twists, once so commonplace, now springing into his mind like old friends. Mae was foolish, but no more foolish than most girls who have led a sheltered life. Back home she knew what to do and what not to do. Out here she was helpless.

Did he love her? He guarded himself against the thought. He had no right to love—for three years—to love a girl like Mae. The contrast of their locked hands proved it. His own rugged, calloused, the fine hair burnt light by the sun. Hers soft, with long fingers, nails well cut, polished. He did love her—but what did he love in her? Herself, or what she symbolized?

"Three years," she mused. "That's not eternity."

"No," he lied.

Three years. Would he be alive in three years? Every day in Morocco men of the Legion fell—one, two here, another, a fourth there. Would his fate be to remain somewhere? Cordova had been right. Men seldom emerged twice from such places as the grove. In the loose soil, under crosses made of packing case boards, the bodies of his comrades had filtered away.

"Moody?" she asked.

"Happy," he retorted.

They stood hand in hand on the brink of a cliff dominating the Mediterranean. The deep blue of the sea merged in growing shades of gray with the curve of the sky.

"What's across there?" Mae asked suddenly.

"Where you're pointing? Sicily, I guess."

"And straight ahead?"

"Spain, I think. France is between the two."

She laughed merrily.

"This is a big world!"

He stepped aside to light a cigaret, saw her tall, slender body outlined against the sky. She was radiant, she was happy, she was forgetting the future. He almost hated her for the ache she brought in him. His mind had been at peace; she had dwindled to no more than a name, a sketchy face, far in the past. Now she brought a breath of strong life, of normal living as he had been trained to understand it. Her kind was not for men who enlisted and fought, for those who followed adventure and danger.

A man could not have both, though he might love both.

"Five o'clock," he said. "I have an appointment at eight."

"Only one evening—and you—" she protested.

"Business," he said laconically.

They went back and got in the taxi.

"You know," Mae remarked after a moment of silence, "I love you more and more, although I scarcely know you as you are now? You seem stronger. I don't mean strength of arms, but bigger inside."

His heart seemed to dilate, to lift in his throat and choke him. He felt uncertain of himself, near tears. This was a bitter test. Cordova might get away and resume the life he liked. And he, Maguil, would plod on—plod on three years, unless his body, too, filtered away under a rudely fashioned plank cross.

"You seem so strong," she repeated.

"I hope I am strong," he said, thinking of that night.

CHAPTER III

PRIZE FIGHT

MAGUIL was introduced to his chief second, Bob.

"You look fairly tough, son," Bob said in English while he was undressing behind a screen, "and I like your shoulders. If I'd known you two weeks back, I'll be damned if I couldn't have taught you enough to knock Tamar cold. He's yellow and his boxing wouldn't amount to much anywhere but here. Hard puncher, though, when he can land. That guy, Desfarges, tells me you never fought professional—"

"I've boxed in the gym with professionals, long ago—mostly fooling around," Maguil explained. He liked the small, gray haired chap who used a first name for complete identification—Bob Robert. "You an American, too, Bob?"

"Do I look like a Swede?"

Bob talked on, as he watched Maguil slip into the fighting trunks. He had been a jockey long ago, had gone to France—mixed with fighters. He spoke of the early days of the sport in France, of Willie Lewis, Joe Jeanette, Billy Papke, Frank Moran, of Georges Carpentier when the golden lad had been young—and good.

"In a way, son, I wish that Tamar was a little better. A real good man could drop you without punishing you much. I'm telling you, he is yellow, and if you want some of the extra money Desfarges promised you if you lasted, catch him as he rushes in—" Bob pinched Maguil's arms gently. "There's power in those arms, son. Keep your head clear and you can't miss his chin. I've seen him fight."

"All right, Bob."

"Came here with a young fellow, flyweight, I did—a nice kid but he loves the ladies. Got tangled up here and won't leave. Half French and half wop; can you blame him? Lost money. Desfarges will pay my passage back to France for making this look real. You're in the Legion, eh? Hear they pay you about one cent a day. But that's your business. Want to see one of the fights? The semi-final is going on in a few minutes. It'll keep your mind off yourself."

In the empty barroom outside the wings, they picked up Cordova, disguised in a civilian cap and coat, and entered the Olympia Hall proper. Maguil had seen it several times when on short leave to Oran, for the place was ordinarily a vaudeville and moving picture hall. Tonight it was crowded, filled to the walls. The audience was recruited from the many races and classes of Oran—Spaniards, Jews, Arabs, Frenchmen, a sprinkling of negroes and stray sailors from the port. In the front rows of the orchestra, in the boxes, were uniforms aplenty. Four or five rows deep on three sides of the ring were the best seats, separated from the canvas only by the ropes. As the ring itself was erected on the stage, all had a good view. The border lights were on for the present, as a bout had just ended. But immediately above the ring were several huge tin disks, centered by great bulbs, which supplied illumination during the combats.

Maguil distinguished, with amused interest, a veiled native woman in the audience below, one eye peering from the folds of her white hood. She was with a man wearing a fez. Maguil sat between Cordova and Bob on one of the rear stage benches. Behind them stood the firemen on duty, with glinting brass helmets and wide white and red belts bearing hooks and metal loops.

The timekeeper and one of the judges sat at a little table near the ring; the gong was replaced by a dinner bell. The referee for the next contest was none other than Desfarges, alert and happy, enjoying the applause.

"Promoter as referee," Bob grumbled. "If the boxing federation knew—"

The principals for the semi-final entered the ring. They were lightweights. One, brown of skin, with a big nose and sleek black hair, was a Jewish fighter. The other was an Arab with a strong strain of negro blood, very swarthy, long muscles on arms and legs, wide of shoulders and almost without hips. The Jewish boy was introduced as Kid Sock—Bob confessed selling him the name for fifty francs—while the Arab bowed in answer to Ahmed ben Aziz. The dinner bell rang.

Both darted to the center of the ring but did not collide. They paused before each other and made little feints. This lasted nearly fifty seconds. Then the Jewish boy closed in, landed two or three blows, leaped back. Darting, pauses, then another flurry. Four rounds passed, all swings and hooks. Kid Sock was sorely in need of some of the skill of some of his American brothers, Benny Leonard, Lew Tendler, Sid Terris. Ahmed, who caught it on the face often, worked for the body, and Kid Sock went down in the seventh round, as much from his own exertion as from punishment.

"Badly trained," Bob commented.

The victorious Arab pressed his thick lips several times on the cheeks of his defeated foe, the ring was cleared, and the moment had arrived for Maguil to go forward. He had no sense of reality as he parted the ropes, sank into the kitchen chair provided for rest between rounds. A basin and a pitcher of enameled ware were handy for the gloved gladiators.

Tamar appeared, sank in his chair after holding his hands together over his head to thank the spectators for their thunderous applause. He was around twenty-five, very well built, lean of stomach, with good strong arms. Maguil returned his glare calmly.

Desfarges lifted his hands for silence.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we have received a wire today from Morrison. He has broken his hand in training. As good fortune would have it, for all concerned, there was in Algiers another American light heavyweight, Shark Thompson, who holds knockout victories over many men of first class. Also a point decision over Morrison, won in Detroit, New Jersey. There has been a change, a substitution, and money will be refunded at the box office to those who present themselves within five minutes. At the end of that time the gates will be closed—and the fight will go on. Twelve rounds to a decision between Tamar, whom you all know, and Shark Thompson, named as a worthy successor to Kid McCoy by such boxing experts as Rubyon and Eddy Green. The men weighed before the boxing committee—and are inside the limit."

No one moved. Every one was eager to see Shark Thompson struggle against the Oranese Hope for twelve rounds. Desfarges' knees quivered, his brow dripped, but he smiled, reading from a long list, calling off prizes offered by local firms to the winner as a form of advertisement. Much wine was promised, a gold watch, a haircut—Maguil joined in the laughter—and a meal ticket good for six feeds. While Desfarges read and amused the crowd, the fighters' seconds tossed for the four ounce gloves. They were greenish and startled Maguil who had imagined himself wearing the oxblood gloves used in the States.

THE REFEREE, a quiet, clean shaven young man, who doubled as a newspaper reporter, called the two principals to the center of the ring. Maguil was surprised to find himself several inches taller than Tamar.

"Cut the conversation," Tamar growled. "I won't hit him low, and he won't get the chance."

Maguil flushed. After all, he could receive a little consideration, he thought, as he was saving the show and giving Tamar easy glory. He looked again at the smooth blond hair, the flat, small ears, the big, jutting chin and the twisted, sneering lips. And he knew what a different man Tamar would have been facing Morrison, who was a ghost with a nap in each glove.

Maguil, back in his corner, tested the ropes, rubbed his soles on the rosin, as Bob ordered. The old trainer was leaning over his shoulder peering at the timekeeper.

"Go get him," he said.

The dinner bell sounded imperiously. And he rose, with a queer feeling that he had been sawed in half at the waist. He avoided Tamar's rush by sliding along the ropes, without effort of will, instinctively. That was nothing, but it drew applause, for the Shark had already found followers. Maguil flipped his left forward, then cut upward with his right. His arms were long enough.

The right fist landed, first blow of the fight—and Tamar fell over on his side, rolled and was up, teeth bare and murder in his eyes. For Tamar was offended that the sheep did not slaughter as easily as he had expected. Maguil was even more astonished. He had not expected to score a knockdown. Tamar leaped forward again, landed with both hands, stomach and chin. Maguil did not think of clinching, took what was coming and pounded back with enthusiasm on his opponent's ribs. He was not dazed, not hurt. His nose smarted, his eyes felt hard within his skull, like agates.

The round went on, lively enough. Maguil's blows did not hit squarely, struck arms, elbows, skull, while Tamar struck flank and chin. Maguil heard the bell ring and wondered how he had lasted so long.

"Good boy," Bob whispered. "But he's kidding you just now. He can do much better. Run away, and when he catches up come up under his guard. You have the reach."

"I'll try," Maguil said.

He rose confidently at the bell, stepped around briskly. Tamar, sheltered by his gloves, crouched in pursuit. Cordova, catching Maguil's eye during a clinch, nodded. The five hundred francs had been paid.

Maguil landed a long right, as Tamar started a swing. The Oranese straightened, gasped and retreated. Maguil reached his face, drove him to the ropes and set himself for a good smash. Then, though he could still see Tamar's feet and knees, torso and head vanished from sight—and something happened. Maguil understood that he was down.

He was not hurt. His head was heavy and the thoughts came slowly; that was all. He rose, grappled, felt his first pain, blows in the sides that hurt like crushed boils. He winced and shoved Tamar off, but the Oranese was flushed, eager.

"*Sonne-le, Tamar, sonne-le!*"

The crowd shifted allegiance. The Shark was in a bad way. Maguil, with his shoulders floating in space ahead of his head and rocky chin, was aware that Mr. Thompson, whom he represented, was not well off. He drove into a clinch, not from knowledge, but like a drowning man hugging a spar. The referee hissed angry French into his ear, pushed him away, while Tamar, laughing, bobbed his head and flashed his fists.

Maguil felt impacts on his mouth, on his nose. He put his head down, braced his feet solidly and punched away, not caring where he landed, but determined to remain rooted to this spot until it was over. When his target receded, he followed doggedly, three, four steps. His enmity was personal now. He hated Tamar.

Then Bob was leading him back to his corner.

"Did I catch it?" Maguil asked hopefully.

"No. Round's finished. Watch him when he's against the ropes. That's the only trick he has, dodging and coming up on the side."

"Tell that nig to let my stomach alone," Maguil pleaded.

Bob's Senegalese assistant was digging his fingers deep under the pretext of massage. Bob kicked the lad aside.

Tamar hurtled forward, still crouching; dancing, leaping, showing off. He gloated as he came, dodged Maguil's blows with ease, hammered him from corner to corner, around the head and on his sore flanks.

"Well, why don't you cheat again?" Tamar muttered.

Cheat? Tamar no doubt referred to the first blow that had dropped him so ridiculously. Maguil thought hard. How had he done that? Left, then a swing, a little long of that chin. Tamar was pushed off balance again and flopped about foolishly, raving, uncomprehending. When he was up, Maguil managed to locate his face, and drove him halfway through the ropes. Tamar came back furiously, snorting in the clinches, gasping and so excited that he played for the head and forgot the body. Maguil's mouth filled with blood, sweat dripped into his eyes, already smarting from dust and glare.

"This is the fourth round coming up," Bob said as he washed his face. "Let him do all the pushing the first part of the round. Hang on. He's puffing worse than you. Broke training a week ago when he knew he'd have to fight only a bum. He's only a French pug, sonny."

Maguil clung and wrestled. He was stronger in his arms than Tamar. He sheltered his head in his arms, leaned over, rested on his enemy's shoulder, until Bob nodded toward him. Then he cut loose, not trying to defend himself, hitting as hard as he could swing. He often missed, spun halfway around, but connected three times with full impact. To his intense surprise Tamar began to cry; tears streaked his smeared cheeks. The end of the round came with startling speed.

"This is the fifth round," Bob warned him. "If he puts you down, stay. You've earned all the money you're going to get. Do you feel bad?"

"No. Did he bruise my face much?"

"No. That blood is from a cut in your mouth." Bob pressed his lips against Maguil's ear. "You mean you don't feel bad enough to quit?"

"No—"

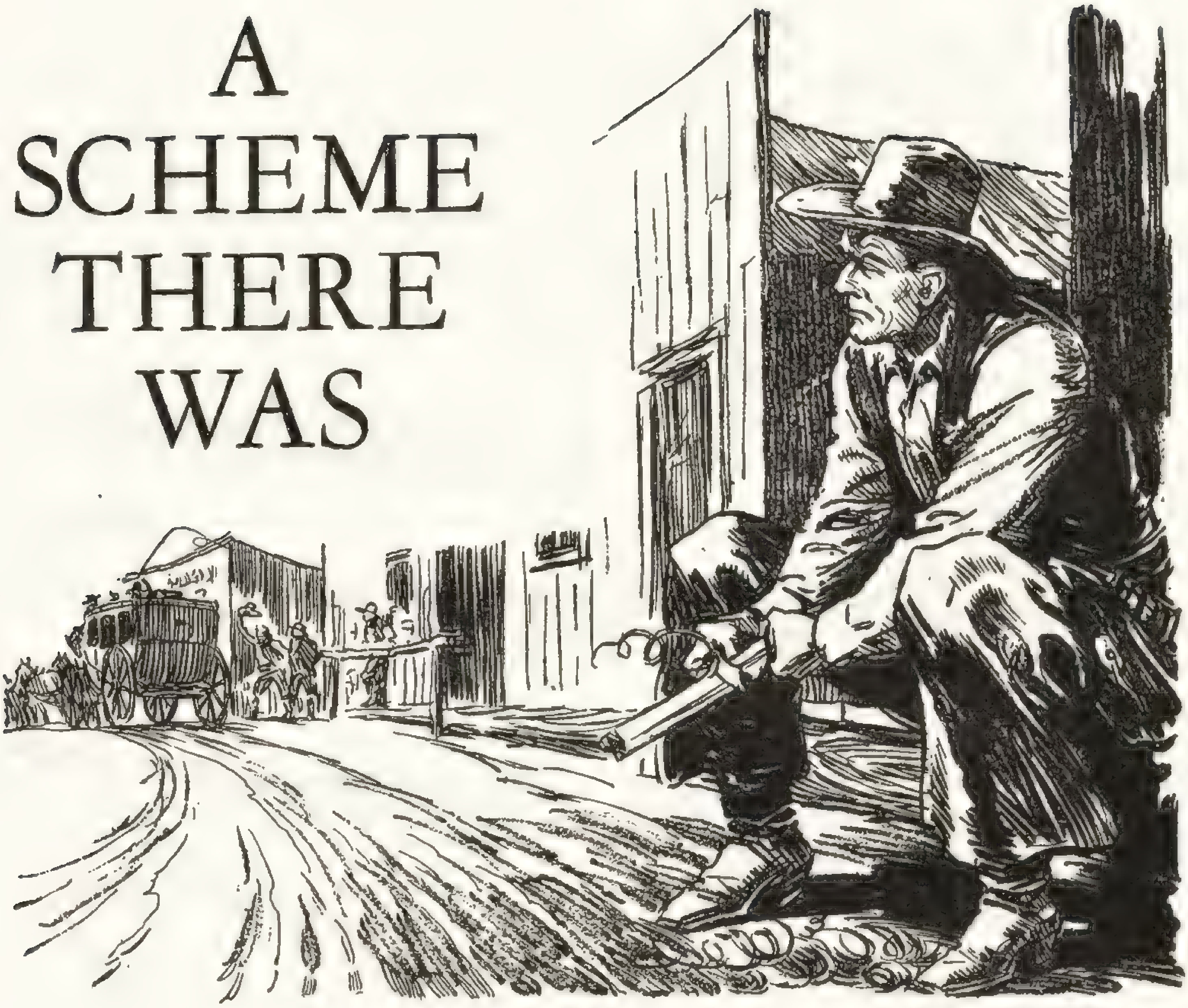
Tamar came out for the fifth round cautiously, using all the meager lore he had picked up in a few major fights. Possibly he had a suspicion that Desfarges had really found a professional. His confidence grew when Maguil, who had nothing but strength and native agility, became puzzled in the boxing game, floundered about, missed blows by two feet.

Then the Oranese suddenly charged, sent Maguil reeling with three lefts to the stomach in rapid succession, then brought the Shark down with two rights to the jaw. Maguil found himself very comfortable on the canvas, remained seated, legs apart, one arm over the lower rope. He had lasted longer than expected, was satisfied with himself. Too bad he lacked the skill to wipe the grin off that mouth, but no one can achieve the impossible.

The bell saved him—at the count of five.

TO BE CONCLUDED

A SCHEME THERE WAS



A Story of the Whittling Sheriff of Mohave Wells

By W. C. TUTTLE

BUCK BRADY stopped whittling long enough to brush aside the damp lock of roan colored hair from his forehead and consider the two passengers on the Mohave Wells-Lone Mule stage. The girl did not look over eighteen; she had hair the color of spun gold, and a delicate oval face. Buck could not tell the color of her eyes at that distance, but he knew they were blue. She was wearing a blue dress.

The man was possibly less than twenty-five, rather delicate looking, and his hair was of nearly the same color as the girl's. Buck looked them over thoughtfully, a rather sad expression in his faded blue eyes. Buck was tall and lean, with a long face, high cheekbones and a mop of roan colored hair, one lock of which seemed always to hang down below the edge of his sombrero.

Buck was the sheriff of that county. He was slow moving, slow of speech. He was barely thirty-five and looked forty-five. He never seemed in a hurry, always deliberate, yet there were men in the Mohave who swore Buck could draw a six-shooter and shoot it straight faster than a rattler could strike. But Buck's obsession was whittling. Hour after hour he would sit in the shade of his little office, peeling off dainty spirals from soft pine. Whittling and meditating.

As he considered the couple on the stage Larry Lebec, the driver, came from a store farther down the street, ready to start for Lone Mule City.

"Hyah, Buck," he drawled, stopping.

"H'lo, Larry. Got a couple passengers, eh?"

Larry spat thoughtfully, squinting against the sun.

"Brother 'n' sister—goin' t' Lone Mule, Buck. Ort t' be a law agin it."

"Ort to be," Buck said slowly. "Skinner?"

"Yeah. I found out that much. Advertisin' payin' jobs for girls. Words it sweet and pretty. Brother expects to git a good job, too. Ain't very well, he ain't. Name's Nestor. His name's Harry and hers is Gladys. From the East. Gawd, why do them kind head for the desert—and Lone Mule? They'll be helpless in Lone Mule. Skinner 'n' Eley boss the damn' place. I know Skinner."

"I know him," slowly. "I know Eley, too. Pretty girl."

"Uh-huh. I done tried to tell 'em a few facts, but they don't seem to *sabe* my lingo. Mebbe I don't *hablar* English."

Buck sighed and wiped the blade of his knife along the top of his boot.

"Skinner and Eley kinda boss Lone Mule, eh? Sheriff don't do nothin'?"

"That Gila Monster? Hell's delight, Buck! All he does is git drunk. That's why Skinner had him voted into office. Well, I've gotta be goin'."

Buck watched the stage pass the office, a strained expression about his eyes. It hurt Buck to see that girl going to Lone Mule City. He knew Lone Mule—a boom mining town, a regular hell town out there on the edge of the desert, bossed by Dave Skinner and Charley Eley, who owned all the liquor and honky-tonk privileges, owned a big interest in the Lone Mule mine, and ran the town to suit themselves.

Buck knew that Skinner's trouble was in getting girls for his honky-tonks and saloons. The regulars shied away. Living conditions were too crude, the remuneration too small. And Buck knew that Skinner had advertised in a clever way, mentioning the need of waitresses in his big café, as well as singers, and musicians—no previous experience necessary; and a good salary.

That night at supper Buck told his wife about this girl. Buck seldom said anything against any man, but Skinner's ethics had rubbed Buck the wrong way.

"It ain't none of my business," he told his wife, "but it kinda gits me. I ain't never willin'ly shot any man, and I hope I never will, but I wish Dave Skinner was triplets and I jist had three shells in my gun."

"Kind of a rattler, ain't he, honey?" asked Mrs. Brady.

"I wouldn't go that far," said Buck, attacking his meal, "'cause as far as I can figger out, a rattler is clean minded and strikes in self-defense."

"I've heard that them Lone Mule folks don't like you, honey."

"Oh, they ain't so dumb," drawled Buck. "No, ma'am, I don't reckon any of 'em would yell for help if they seen me fall in a well. They'd dump in a couple big rocks and call it a rescue."

Buck was right. Skinner and Eley and their cohorts had little use for the sheriff of Mohave Wells. Skinner was a man of slight physique, with a putty colored skin—an unhealthy looking individual, lean, hungry looking, with small greenish eyes and a thin lipped mouth.

Eley was a big man, swarthy as an Indian, powerful and overbearing. Eley was a fighter with his hands; Skinner with a gun. Skinner was the keen minded gambler, Eley the bouncer. Together they had worked as a combine to rule Lone Mule City.

Clyde Mellon was their sheriff. His office was at Jewel City, and he spent little time in Lone Mule. An occasional killing or a robbery would bring him to the mines, where Skinner would tip him off as to whether it was to the interests of Skinner and Eley to make an arrest or not. They were adept at railroading an enemy.

Little news of Lone Mule City came to Mohave Wells, except from the stage driver, or a disgruntled miner or gambler. Stage passengers usually went by way of Jewel City, as it was nearer to Lone Mule and Skinner and Eley owned that stage line.

Day after day Buck Brady questioned Larry Lebec about the girl and her brother, but Larry had little news. The girl was working in a restaurant; the brother had a job as a mucker in the Lone Mule mine. Larry finally made it a point to seek the girl and find out how things were; but she had been let out and was no longer employed there. Larry asked the proprietor why she had been fired, but the man merely shrugged his shoulders. Larry went to the timekeeper's office at the mine and inquired about Harry Nestor. The timekeeper discovered that Nestor had been discharged. No, he did not know why.

But Larry knew either Skinner or Eley had engineered the deal. Larry told Buck Brady about it and promised to investigate further. A few days later Larry talked with a half drunken gambler, who had been fired from Skinner's place, and he told Larry that Skinner had been trying to induce the girl to work for him. The gambler called Skinner a lot of unprintable names, packed up his things and came out to Mohave Wells, where Buck talked with him.

He told Buck that Eley had seen the girl and was crazy about her. It was Eley who had forced the restaurant man to fire her, and a word from Eley had settled Harry Nestor, as far as mine work was concerned. Buck decided that Skinner and Eley knew the Nestors were broke, and they were forcing them either to work for Skinner and Eley or not work in Lone Mule.

A few days later Larry sat down in front of Buck's office and watched Buck cut keen shavings from a soft pine board.

"You like to whittle, don'tcha, Buck?" he asked.

"Yea-a-ah," drawled Buck, a lazy smile in his eyes. "My idea of heaven is a shady spot, nothin' to do, and a big pile of soft pine. Anythin' new, Larry?"

"Nothin' much. I seen Harry Nestor today. Shore looks bad. I seen him buy a can of salmon and a nickel's worth of crackers. Gawd, I reckon things are breakin' bad for them two. He went upstairs in an old shack. I was in Skinner and Eley's place, but the Nestor girl wasn't there. I reckon they're holdin' on. Folks up there are awful close mouthed, Buck. Scared, that's it."

"I ort t' go up there," mused Buck. "Might git 'em out. Prob'ly ain't got the price of a ticket. Prob'ly mean shootin' somebody."

"Mean trouble," nodded Larry. "They don't like you."

Buck put away his knife and drew a ten-dollar bill from his pocket.

"Give 'em that bill, Larry. If they want to git away, bring 'em out, and I'll pay their freight. The girl could work for the wife awhile. She'll be needin' help pretty soon. Mebbe I could find the kid a job. I dunno."

"They'll appreciate this," said Larry heartily.

"Mebbe. I dunno either of 'em. But whether they do or not, it'll save the girl from them two carrion crows."

"I'll see 'em tomorrow," promised Larry. "They're all right, them two. No earthly business in this country. You got to have more than eddication in this country. You gotta have sense."

BUCK watched for the stage next day. He had talked it over with his wife, and she was willing to take the girl in until she could save up a little money. If Buck's wife had not been endowed with something more than education, she might have suspected that Gladys Nestor's pretty face had turned his head. But Buck was not interested in pretty girls, except that he did not want to see them going to Lone Mule City, innocently looking for an honest job.

The stage was due in Mohave Wells at about four o'clock in the afternoon, but on this day it came in about three-thirty, all four horses lathering from a weary run. Larry skidded the stage to a stop in front of the stage office, threw open the stage door; and out came Gladys and Harry Nestor. The girl was bareheaded, her dress torn; Harry was without hat or coat and one sleeve of his shirt was missing. His face was bruised.

Larry asked the office man to hold the team, and came down to Buck's office, where Buck stood in the doorway, wondering what it was all about. He nodded to the half hysterical girl, glanced at the young man, and turned to Larry.

"You got to take care of 'em, Buck," he said, breathing hard. "I had one hell of a time gettin' 'em out of Lone Mule. I shore fanned that team, but they ain't far behind."

"They?" queried Buck.

"Skinner and some of his tough gang. Eley is dead, and Skinner swears that Harry Nestor shot and killed him."

Buck's nose twitched a little as he looked at Harry Nestor. The boy's face was the color of ashes.

"How about it, son?" asked Buck kindly.

The boy swallowed painfully, shook his head, seemingly bereft of speech.

"What do you know, ma'am?" asked Buck.

"Oh, Harry did not shoot him! I know he didn't do it."

"Didja see who shot him?"

Gladys shook her head wearily.

"No, I—I don't know."

"They ain't far behind us," said Larry nervously. "I reckon they aim to tie off on the kid."

"Take the girl down to my place, Larry," said Buck. "She'll be safe. They only want this kid, but if they monkey around down there, Ma Brady shore knows how to handle my sawed off Winchester shotgun. Git goin'."

Larry took the girl down a narrow alley past the office, and Buck took the boy into the jail.

"I dunno the facts of the matter," he told Harry, "but that can wait. I'm goin' to protect your life by lockin' you up, son. Nobody can take you out of that cell without a key—and I have the only key. You jist set down and take it easy. Nobody in this here desert country ever took a man away from me yet; so don't worry. We'll talk later."

"Thank you, Mr. Brady."

"You're welcome, Mr. Nestor."

Buck went back to the little porch, took out his knife and began whittling, his sombrero low over his eyes. He saw Skinner and four of his men ride in and tie their horses in front of Mohave Wells' one saloon. They went in to get a drink.

Larry Lebec came back and noted the sweaty horses at the hitchrack across the street.

"Got here, eh?" he said.

"Yea-a-a-ah. Go ahead and put up your team. They won't do much."

About fifteen minutes later Skinner came alone from the saloon. Buck quit whittling and put away his knife. Skinner stopped at the edge of the sidewalk and considered the sheriff intently for several moments.

"We came down here to take a murderer back with us, Brady."

"Yea-a-a-ah? What murderer?"

"That young Nestor you've got inside there."

"Oh, that kid?"

"He murdered Eley."

"That so?"

"I'm tellin' you, Brady. Do you want Mellon to have to come after him?"

"No-o, I don't want Clyde Mellon monkeyin' around here, Skinner."

"Then turn him over to me. We'll take him back and give him a fair trial.'

"Yea-a-a-ah? I suppose you want the girl, too."

"She'll have to come back as a witness."

Buck grinned slowly, and his right hand slid back a little. He scratched his thumb on the edge of the holster, his pale eyes on Skinner's right hand.

"Skinner—" slowly—"I've been waitin' for a chance to tell you what a dirty specimen you are. I've shore got a lot to tell you."

"I'm not here for that purpose, Brady."

"This is jist sort of a by-product, Skinner. No trouble a-tall. Fingers itch? Scratch 'em, you carrion coyote! Not interested? Keep your hand away from that gun. Now, this is business. You'll not take that kid, and you'll not take that girl. Go back and get your sheriff. By the time he gets here, none of you will ever find them two. Leave one of your men here to watch where they go, and that man might as well drink some of your own cyanide. I'm runnin' this end of the deal, and you'll find that I rate as high in Mohave Wells as you do in Lone Mule. Skinner, I've got you whipped. I don't believe that kid ever killed Eley, but if he did he shore deserves a lot more of a chance than you and your hired killers would ever give him."

Skinner's lips tightened and his eyes narrowed, but he was obliged to swallow this.

"I'll put you out of this county," he threatened. "You're defendin' a murderer. You're as guilty as he is in the eyes of the law."

"That law is cockeyed, Skinner; and I'm not goin' accordin' to written laws. When I see a coyote chasin' a rabbit, I'm for the rabbit. That's my law. Go home and forget it."

"Some day this country is goin' to be too hot for you, Brady."

"Yeah, and when it does, you won't gloat a hell of a lot, 'cause where you'll be, this'll be the Arctic, beside what you'll be sufferin'."

"All right. But I'll tell you this much—I'm comin' back here with the law behind me, and you better have that damn' murderer where we can get him."

"When you come back here you and your law better wear iron overcoats, 'cause I'll be lookin' for you."

Skinner turned and went back to the saloon, but he and his men made no move to leave Mohave Wells. Buck went in and bolted the back door, unlocked the cell door and asked Harry Nestor to come out into the front office, where they might watch the saloon. Buck took a Winchester rifle from the gun rack and sat with it across his knees, while the white faced kid sat near him on the edge of a chair.

"I NEVER killed him, Mr. Brady," protested Harry. "Why, I never had a gun. My sister had work at a restaurant and I was working in the big mine. We were getting along all right. Mr. Skinner tried to get Glad to work in his dance hall. She can play a piano. But she wouldn't go into a place like that.

"Those women in there were terrible, and drunken men—Glad wouldn't go into that place. Then Glad got let out at the restaurant, and somebody stole what money she had. And that same day I got fired. I—I don't believe they paid me what I had coming. I protested, but the man said I could take it or leave it.

"We just had a little room upstairs in an old shack. I had to sleep on the floor with just one blanket. Mr. Skinner kept coming up to see Glad, and sometimes Mr. Eley would come up. Mr. Skinner threatened me, and I—I didn't know what to do. Everybody up there is his friend.

"One day Mr. Eley came up and argued with Glad. He tried to get me to drink some whisky, but I couldn't do it. And Mr. Skinner came up that same day, and he swore at Eley, who swore back at him. They really talked nasty in front of Glad. Oh, we wanted to get away from there, but we didn't have money to pay stage fare. It was awful, Mr. Brady."

"Yeah, I reckon it wasn't pleasant, son."

"It was terrible. And—today—"

"That's the main thing," said Buck slowly. "Tell it."

"Mr. Eley came up there and he had been drinking. He's such a big man. He shut the door. Glad and me were having a bite of lunch. He told me to—to get the hell out of there. I tried to remonstrate with him, but he swore at me and said he was through fooling around with me.

"I thought he was going to kill me. Perhaps that was his intentions. Glad tried to reason with him, but it was no use. He started for me—" Harry rubbed the back of his right hand across his eyes.

"I was afraid, Mr. Brady. There was a small chair, which I picked up and threw at him. I—I guess he was unprepared, and it struck him in the face, knocking him down on his knees. He had a gun. His face was bleeding. I—I don't know why I did it, but I sprang on him, trying to hit him with my fists. He threw me aside, but I—I guess I came back and we fell down again.

"Oh, I don't remember—much. Glad was screaming. And then there was the noise of a gun. I was confused—hurt a little, I suppose. I remember the door was open. Glad had her hands over her face, and there was Eley on his back, blood running from one side of his head. It was awful. Men were coming in, and I saw Skinner. He told me I had killed a man. And then there was the stage driver. He shoved Glad through the door. He didn't seem to mind the other men, but he had a gun pointed at Skinner, and he said to me, 'Get downstairs as fast as you can and put your sister on my stage.'

"I don't remember getting down there. Glad was almost fainting, but I put her in the stage, which was across the street. We were hardly in, when we saw the driver running toward us, and I heard him spring up on the stage. He cried out something to some men in front of the station—and I—think he ran those horses all the way down here, while Glad and I clung to each other and tried to keep from injuring ourselves."

"You didn't shoot Eley with his own gun, didja?" asked Buck.

"No, I did not."

"You say the door was open, but it was shut when the fight started. Didja fall against it?"

"No, we were never near it, Mr. Brady."

"Who didja see first—after Eley was shot?"

"Mr. Skinner."

"Uh-huh. Do you reckon Skinner was mad at Eley over your sister?"

"He was one day. He told Mr. Eley to keep his paws off her."

"What did Eley say?"

"I should hate to repeat it."

"Don't. I know. You go on back in that cell and shut the door. It locks on a spring."

"They can't arrest me for murder, can they? I never killed him."

"Not in Mohave Wells, son, not while I'm sheriff. And there ain't another civilized county in this here State where they'd arrest a man for killin' a predatory animal. You run along. I've got a little whittlin' to do."

SKINNER was mad, but he did not talk openly in the saloon. He knew how Buck Brady stood with the people of Mohave Wells. He and his men lingered in the saloon, drinking a little. Finally they started a poker game to kill time. Skinner's men asked no questions. They were content to stay there and wait for Skinner to tell them what to do. They were Skinner's hired killers and their time belonged to him.

They ate supper at the little Chinese restaurant. Buck Brady knew there was some reason for their staying in Mohave Wells, and as he whittled and whittled he wondered what that reason might be. Larry Lebec came down after supper, wondering why Skinner and his men stayed.

"Go down to my house," said Buck. "They might be aimin' to get that girl, but I don't think so. The kid told me the story about you gettin' 'em out of that town. Where'd you first see Skinner—about the time of the fight?"

"I was on the stage, Buck. The station is almost across the street from where they had the fight. I heard that shot, but

I didn't know where it was. Then I seen Skinner. He was at the entrance to them stairs, and I don't know whether he was comin' out or goin' in.

"He yelled at somebody and pointed up them stairs. I had a hunch; so over I went and up the stairs. It shore was a mess. There was Eley, shot through the head, and everythin' upset. Skinner was accusin' the kid of shootin' Eley; so I th'owed my gun down on Skinner and took them kids away. We shore fanned the breeze out of there."

"That's fine, pardner. Trot down to the house, will you?"

"I shore will. See you later."

Darkness came, but Buck stayed there. The lights of the saloon were bright enough for him to see the horses at the hitchrack. Buck drew down his window shade and lighted a lamp. He had a peephole in that old shade; a misguided cowboy had sent a .45 slug through the shade one night.

It was about eight o'clock when the five men came from the saloon, mounted their horses and came down the street past the office. Buck watched them closely, and he saw one man turn back as the others galloped on. He rode up to the office and dismounted. A few moments later he knocked, and Buck asked him to come in.

It was Skinner, but a rather apologetic Skinner. Buck stood up and faced him.

"I've been thinkin' this thing over, Brady," he said humbly. "We don't want to go off half cocked. I realize we've been a little hasty and I know how you feel toward me."

It was so unlike Skinner that Buck was instantly alert, suspicious.

"Yeah?" he queried.

Skinner came in a little closer. They were within arm's reach of each other now.

"The girl saw the whole thing," said Skinner. "I never had a chance to question her about what she saw. Naturally she wouldn't incriminate her own brother, but I'd like to hear what she'd have to say."

"Meanin' what?" asked Buck. His right hand was itching for that gun.

"Take me where she is. You've got the best of it, Brady. We'll question her together, eh? That's the stuff. I'd even give you my gun—"

His right hand jerked back. Perhaps Skinner was really going to give Buck that gun, but his action was altogether too sudden to suit Buck, whose gun came up like a flash. With a short arm jerk Buck snapped the heavy barrel against the side of Skinner's head.

Skinner went down like a pole-axed beef, shaking the office, his right hand convulsively gripping the gun he had drawn. Buck kicked it aside.

"Must 'a' thought he was pretty fast," muttered Buck. "Fool!"

He grasped Skinner by the nape of the neck and dragged him back to the cell, where he unlocked the door.

"Mr. Brady?" asked Harry Nestor nervously.

"And companion," grunted Buck, as he unlocked the door and dragged Skinner inside and stretched him out on the bunk.

"C'mon, son," said Buck, and they went out to the office.

"Stay here," ordered Buck, and went outside, where he tied the reins up on Skinner's horse, swung the animal around and slapped it with his hat.

Buck came back, blew out the light and told Harry to follow him. They went through the back door, and in a few minutes they were down at Buck's house. Larry was there, the shotgun across his lap. Gladys was overjoyed at sight of Harry.

"I was tellin' her that Buck would protect her brother," said Mrs. Brady.

"How about a little somethin' to eat, Ma?" asked Buck. "Me and the kid ain't nourished yet."

"Oh, I don't believe I shall ever have an appetite again," said Harry.

"You will here," said Buck.

"Skinner and his gang pull out?" asked Larry.

"Little while ago."

"Why did they stay around here?"

Buck shook his head slowly.

"I wish I knew, Larry. There was a scheme."

"Was a scheme?"

Came a heavy footfall on the porch, a sharp knock at the door. Buck stepped over against the wall and flung the door open. It was the man from the stage office, hatless, out of breath.

"Brady!" he blurted. "Some men broke into your office a few minutes ago, and they must have fired a dozen shots in there. I was across the street and I heard the shots. It was like a Fourth of July in there. Then the men came running out to their horses, and I heard one of them say:

" 'By Gawd, if we can't get 'em one way, we'll get 'em another!' "

The lines of Buck Brady's face seemed to deepen a little as they looked at him. He sighed softly and turned to look at the serious face of Lebec.

"*Was* a scheme, Larry," he said softly.

When the Whangpoo Burned

By WILLIAM ASHLEY ANDERSON

AFTER hot and cold months dodging around in Kwangsu, Shantung and Honan, where the revolution was still crackling, we felt entitled to our share of the careless frivolity of Shanghai.

Plenty of cash in our pockets; unlimited credit where we particularly needed it; irresponsible youth and boiling health. There were no limits!

The first breath of spring was in the air. This dark night was soft and balmy. But Shanghai is no languorous beauty. Dark she is, and beautiful—but vital! You can in a way almost sense her deep breathing. Hear her half smothered gasps; sudden bursts of high wild singing; laughter; shrieks of delight. You breathe perfumes that hang in her pomaded hair. You know she is perhaps a courtezan; but you know anyway that she is beautiful. If you are young, you can see only the laughing lips wet with wine, the dark sloe eyes deep with mysterious promise. And you are willing to take a chance for the sake of adventure.

But there are contrasts; and in a night's rounds anything might happen.

There had been a wonderful dinner in a private dining room of the old Astor House. Later an operetta well done by a touring company from Australia. After that a wild race in rickshaws through the deserted streets, over the bridge that spans the creek, and away in the darkness, singing, yelling—to a friendly address on Soochow Road.

There was music in the hiss of pneumatic tires; the *huh-huh-huh* of the panting coolies; the sudden sharp ringing of *mafoo's* bells as carriages dashed across our path; the distant rumble of coolies' carts; and the subdued bumping of junks in the congested creek that bordered the road. We came to a clamorous halt in the rustling shadows in front of a handsome house where a sorority of my friends' favorites dwelt.

As we hopped out one of the boys took me by the arm and pointed to the sky in the east.

A saffron glow gave life to the low hanging clouds.

"Fire!" said I.

"Come on," said he.

The two of us turned back to the Bund.

Here we left the rickshaws, and stood for a moment staring across the thick muddy waters of the Whangpoo flowing down to meet the Yangtze. Upon our side of the river rose the handsome front of the great city. Upon the opposite shore were lines of godowns in which were stored the commodities sold by foreign agents. Hugging both shores was the various shipping of a great Oriental port—sampans, junks, lighters, launches and tenders. Midstream was the dirty gray line of foreign warships, one behind another, swinging with bows upstream.

The blatting sound of warning bugles was breaking through the night.

One of the big godowns upstream was in flames; and the glaze, seeming to feed upon itself, was leaping in bursts higher and higher, throwing fantastic orange lights upon the river and the Bund where people were gathering in ant-like clusters.

Coolies in the boats along shore awoke to call out to one another. Soon life stirred among them. There was a great swinging and bumping about, a sort of flurry running up and down the edges of the river.

We found a sampan and persuaded the owner to scull us across.

Halfway over a strange and terrible thing happened. The burning godown standing at the water's edge all at once squirted forth a monstrous stream of liquid fire that ran straight out on the cold surface of the river until it reached midstream, where its momentum was checked by the strong current in the channel. The point then bent in a huge sickle that curved downstream upon us.

"Melting paraffin!" cried my companion. "Godown is packed to the roof with it!"

The molten wax congealed on the underside as soon as it touched the water, but the surface became a seething sea of flame. The great reservoir of roaring liquid fire cataracted forth its contents in a driving stream, until the right side of the river from the shore to mid-channel was a blasting maelstrom.

Rolling downstream faster than a man can row, it missed the line of warships by a narrow margin, lighting the men on deck lividly as they stood at their stations.

Since the volume of the burning fluid was greatest at the point where it gushed forth from its red hot caldron, another point of flame ran over the shallow water along the shore. Soon the fire was sweeping down upon us in a perfect crescent. My companion kept his eyes on the sampan man.

"He'd better not drop his oar," said he.

Rowing across the face of the flames, we reached the shore safely.

But from farther upstream faint cries reached us.

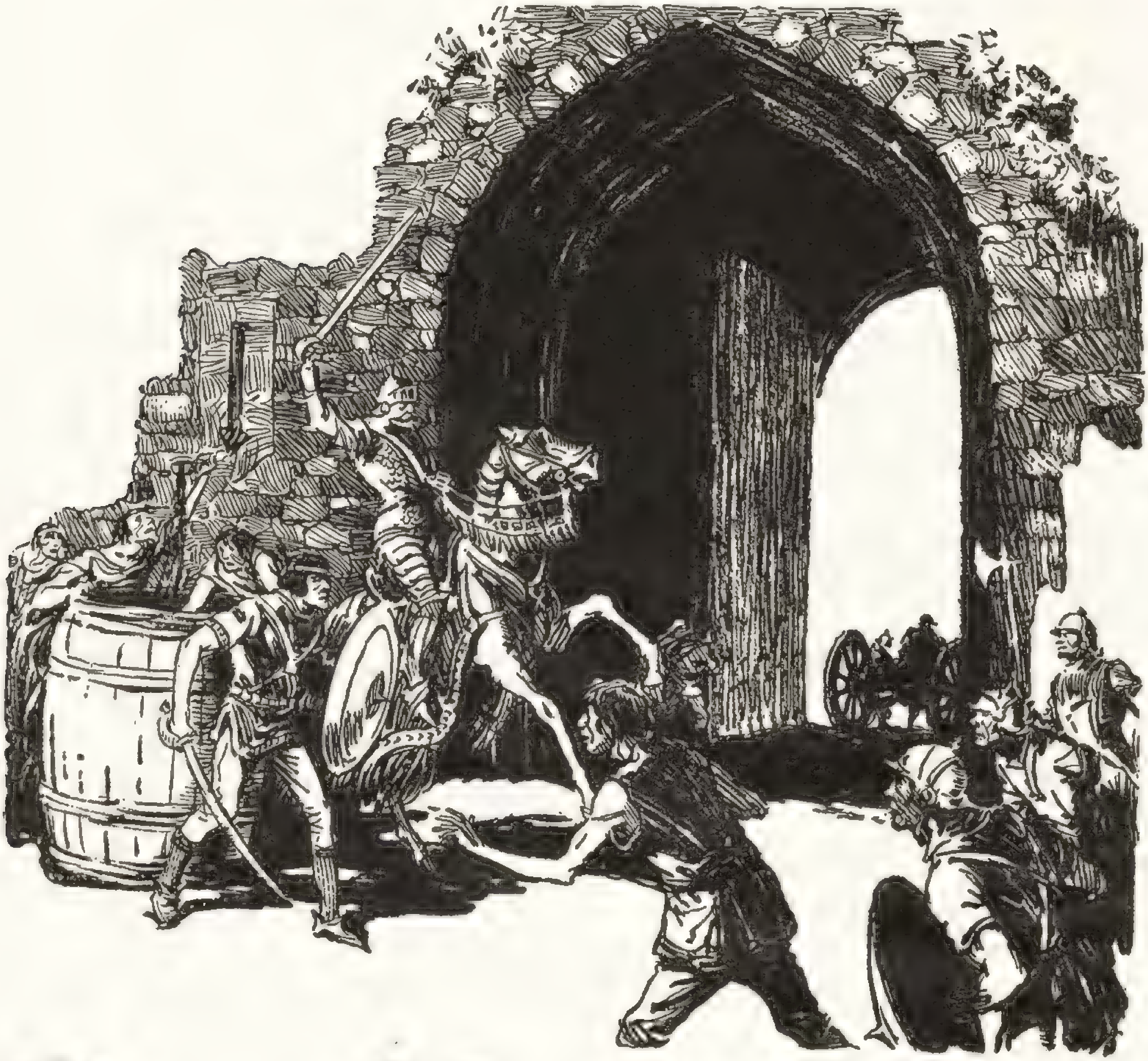
The owners of boats that had been grounded in the mud along shore, trying to save their craft, which they pushed with difficulty out into the stream, found themselves struggling in a losing race with the wall of flame closing in on them.

We could see men running knee deep in water with the fire charging down behind, cutting them off from land and driving them deeper and deeper into the water until they were wallowing up to their waists—then swimming desperately—then gone in a wave of flame.

There was not much sound. No screaming. Occasionally a faint burst of yelling. But the conflagration poured down the stream with a muffling roar, licking up the floundering men in the water as a silent anteater might lick ants from the surface of a leaf.

While this was going on, the rest of our crowd were rioting merrily in Soochow Road.

A Tale of Medieval Italy



OF A VANISHMENT

By F. R. BUCKLEY

TO HIS Lordship my particular good Lord the Count Giulio di Montepulciano; from his Lordship's humble servant L. Caradosso, be these delivered in haste:

My Lord:

GOD WITNESSETH me that I burn to serve your Lordship, but also that I am no more than a poor old soldier unacquent with the intricacies of the law. Whereby it arrives that after four readings of your Lordship's gracious letter I am still unsure whether in this matter of the lawsuit your Grace wishes actually to establish the death of your Excellency's father or (as heretofore) to leave his fate to conjecture and assumption. In the which difficulty I find myself reduced to the telling of the truth, praying your Lordship's indulgence if it be inconvenient to the matter in hand; and will now set forward the facts as they came to my knowledge.

As your Lordship may assure himself by feeling an inch above his left eye (where he will find a scar made by the throwing of a pewter plate when he was of the age of eleven years) your Grace's father was a hard man and of violent temper; subtle of mind, moreover, and singularly free from those scruples which, by holding lesser men to observance of their given word, or the Ten Commandments, keep them back from the attainment of wealth and honor. Your Grace may remember, though very young at the time, the masterly way in which the count came to possession of Montepulciano itself, by inviting its then lord to dinner and serving him food that had been cooked in dirty copper kettles.

No public blame was placed upon him for this, especially after he had hanged the two scullions; but the burgesses of the town, having prospered and waxed fat under their late lord, had the presumption to ignore the findings of both civil and ecclesiastical courts, and to make proclamation that the good count was a murderer—he being at the time absent, endeavoring to bring the benefits of his rule to the city of Bassomonte.

From which beginnings it came to pass that in June of the year of our Lord God one thousand five hundred, I found myself shut up in Montepulciano; and, as lieutenant in the free lances of Simone de Nerli, withstanding a siege by *condottieri* under Bartolomeo il Bianco. I say that I was withstanding it, because Simone, though present, was ill of a tertian fever, and all his duties fell on my shoulders, including the negotiations with Bartolomeo.

It was well that your Lordship's father, selecting free lances for the reduction of the city, should have picked on Il Bianco; even as it was well for Bartolomeo that the citizens should have hired us. We had fought against each other often before; indeed, Bartolomeo was godfather to one of my sons, though whether the one in Forli or the red headed boy in the village outside Pisa, I can not at this distance recall.

It appeared, when we met by night outside the north gate of the city, that Il Bianco was not well pleased at his bargain with your Lordship's father.

"I thought him a merry fellow," says he, who was of that sort himself, "and so I tilted the bottle. And the next morning there was my mark on a paper binding me to besiege this place for next to nothing. Snake!"

He told me how much he was to get for the business, and I told him what the burgesses were paying us (not mentioning, in mercy, that they were also to provide our food) and he groaned with anguish.

" 'Tis a strong town, too," I said, "and the people hot for defiance. Assaults will cost thee men, Bartolomeo."

He groaned again and seized me by the sword belt.

"Lookee, Luigi," he said, "this is a time for friendship to show itself. I have made a bad bargain, even as Simone did in the Romagna that time—and did I press on him? Thou knowest. It's not the men I mind losing, but when these louts drop stones from the battlements the armor is of no use afterward, and as God hears me it goes up in price every day. I shall have to make show of activity, for this lord of mine is a cursed blood drinker who hath sworn not to shave until he had disemboweled ten of these citizens, and if he complain of me to the Venetians I shall lose work next spring. Besides, he might discharge me and send some one that would not be reasonable with thee—and Simone unwell as he is—"

"Well?" says I.

"Lookee—all I ask is that thou discourage rock dropping. That and boiling lead. And on my side, I'll keep a starvation siege until his Lordship wearies of the game. Thou'st plenty of food in the city, eh?"

"None too much," I told him. "The fools provided for us as though we should eat no more than themselves. They forget that we are getting it for nothing."

As I say, I had not meant to tell him this; at the news he groaned again.

"Well," he went on, "the peasants are in sympathy with you—God knows they threw enough stones at us as we came here. Ye can re-provision easily enough. And lookee. Send out your useless mouths, and they shall have safe conduct. Now!"

"I must ask Simone."

"Aye. But he'll agree. God's wounds, man, we're not in this business for pleasure. If all's well, haul thy flag down and up at noon tomorrow."

"Any other news?"

"They say there's to be more fighting in Tuscany, but I suppose Gian Mortelli and that rat of a Tommaso will divide it between them as usual," says Bartolomeo gloomily. "And that yellow haired girl in Faenza told me to tell thee to come back soon, or she would marry the apothecary. Otherwise nothing."

I cared little whether the girl married the apothecary or not, and it was time to change the guard, so we parted; Simone told me to raise and lower the flag as agreed; and for nigh on three weeks the siege went along as pleasantly as heart could desire. We told our citizens to save their fortifications and fight off attacks with the weapons properly designed therefor; and in return Bartolomeo refrained from catapulting dead men and horses into the town.

When, after the first week, the food began to show signs of running low, we sent out fifty women and children, who were escorted to safety by the besieging cavalry. Also Simone was recovered and able to circulate among the citizens, suggesting that the town surrender on good terms before the belly pinch became uncomfortable; this unsuccessfully. They were (as I had found out in the matter of the molten lead) a grim lot of folk, set in their ways; and determined beyond either reason or comfort.

"I doubt whether I have not made as bad a bargain as Bartolomeo," says Simone to me (he was fond of the pleasures of the table); "yet curse me if I like not these people better than such weaklings as we had at Arezzo. There's scarce a bottle of wine in the town, and the corn is all moldy, yet since this is their saint's day, they're playing football in the great square, all that are off guard. Well, we must send more women away and make the best of it."

"Bartolomeo hath signaled for a conference," said I, having seen his flag lowered while Simone was in the town.

"I will speak with him tonight," says the captain. "Do thou get some rest, Luigi, or we shall have thee down with fever also. How it maketh the bones to ache! I could eat a fowl stewed with saffron."

"Between us," says I, alluding to the two armies, "we have eaten the country nigh bare. I could make use of a roast shoulder of mutton and a bottle of wine; neither of which being obtainable, I will go to bed."

BUT APPARENTLY sleep was another of the things that were not to be had; because Simone, his face drawn and pale from weakness and distress of mind, wakened me an hour before midnight, and we sat discussing his news until it was time for me to mount the morning guard on the walls. And the news was of such a nature as to prevent our sleeping peacefully thereafter until the end of the siege.

It was in brief, that, dissatisfied with the duration of the affair, your Lordship's father had withdrawn from Bassomonte, leaving his own troops there under a lieutenant, and was come to direct operations against us himself.

Well, as I have said, it was a strong city, so that we had little fear of anything he could accomplish by assault, even with the two hundred fresh troops of Giuseppe Vitali's horse whom he brought to the reenforcement of Bartolomeo. What he could do, and what he certainly would do on the moment of his arrival, would be to tighten the blockade and make our starvation starvation indeed, instead of the mild fast it had been heretofore. Which was why (his Lordship not being expected for two days) we made haste to send forth from the city all the women and children remaining therein; but they came back that same evening, and that was how we knew his Grace had arrived by forced marches a day earlier than he should.

He had met the poor wretches some five miles from the city; he had cut off all their ears; and he announced to me (who was reviling him from the sentry walk, while his victims wailed miserably from the gate below) that any found outside the town in future, he would hang.

There was a peach orchard about a bowshot from the walls, down by the side of the river; and, since men will risk their lives for the wherewithal to live, it was not long before its branches began to bow under heavier fruit than they were used to. Those who crept out of the city, and those who came up to the walls from without, bearing such sparse provision as the country still afforded, the count hanged them all impartially; he would have hanged Bartolomeo, had I not stabbed that secretary of his who was spying upon one of our midnight parleys.

"Why not desert?" I asked Il Bianco after this affair. "Thou'st more men than Vitali."

"*He* would complain to the Venetians," says Bartolomeo, putting the secretary in the moat. "This has been a bad year, Luigi, and I can not afford to lose work. He is to pay me seventy additional crowns a week, moreover, and it will keep body and soul together until spring."

"I hope we may do the same," says I. "There is no more corn, and today I saw a man selling rats in the street. Simone doth not recover without food, and he will not take what I save for him. All that is fit to eat he distributes among the women."

Bartolomeo sighed.

"Is there no chance of surrender?"

"The folk are like granite rocks."

He sighed again.

"A bad business for both of us," says he. "God's curse on all such as the count! Good night, Luigi—and thankee for killing this vermin."

There was more vermin killed in the next three weeks; not secretaries, either; rats, I mean. I have been in sieges before and since, but never one like unto that; and if there is one thing that may console me for my seventy years and my pipestem legs and the trembling of my hands that were once so firm on a sword hilt, it is the thought that now I never shall again look upon anything so horrible.

For the instruction of those who live in these days when war is little more than the interchange of courtesies, I would tell some of the things which these eyes beheld—not once, nor twice, but every day of twenty-one; but I recall that your Lordship hath a delicate stomach, and the recitation would certes put it out of order for a week. It may be said, though, that once your Grace's father ordered all his camp to cook their evening meal at one time, when a gentle wind was blowing from them to us; and at the smell of the food, the men on guard on the ramparts began to weep, and slavered at the mouth like dogs . . .

Still they would not give up. By this time they resembled less men than ghosts; even those strong ones who could still drag themselves to their stations. The flesh had fallen away from their faces until their bones stood out like the poles of tents; their eyes were reddened from watching; and the thinness of their limbs was but half concealed by garments which had been torn into rags for bandages.

There was not a round cheek in the city—even among our own men, to whom, at the insistence of the burgesses, we allotted more food than the ordinary, that they might be strong to fight. As for us, the commanders, we got less than any one, Simone saying that a tight belt made a clear head.

"If only it were not so clear," I said to Bartolomeo, meeting him by night. "It rings like a bell. If I had a stoup of wine only!"

He stared at me sulkily from under bandages; for the count had forced an assault that afternoon, and Bartolomeo had encountered a citizen with a butcher's cleaver.

"Bad enough without drink," he muttered. "Food should be more to the point. Beating respectable hard working soldiers over the head with axes. As soon try to fight a pack of mad dogs."

"But there is no getting us food," says I, "and besides, we are past it. The thought of it sickens me now, and I had a piece of bread no longer agone than yesterday. But wine—"

"How am I to get wine to thee?" snarls Bartolomeo, caressing his brow. "My wits are not clear, Luigi, thanks to that—"

I was, on the contrary, so light headed that the matter seemed to me of the simplest.

"Look you," says I, "there are two carts of it in the camp—we saw them arrive last even; Greek wine by the look of the barrels; was it not?"

"Aye. Sweet stuff."

Sweet or not, the thought of it made my mouth water until I had a pain in the jaw.

"Beg one of the count; say 'tis for thy men; take it into thy camp, and by night fetch a great circle and bring it to us by the south gate—"

"Plead with that swine, on behalf of such as beat me in the face with butcher tools! And risk my—"

"Nay, but, Bartolomeo," says I, in a voice that might have wheedled tears from a rock, "for my sake and Simone's."

"I could bring thee a skinful."

"He would not touch it unless there was some for all," I told him bitterly—for indeed, from his actions during the last few days, one would have sworn my captain had been begotten and born in the city, instead of having heard of it for the first time when the burgesses wrote to us. "Hunger and sobriety have turned his brain, I think. Only yesterday he told me he would fight your count for nothing, if need were."

Bartolomeo groaned, and his one uncovered eye rolled in the moonlight.

"Something must be done," says he.

"And I have told thee what. Is there any chance that Vitali will turn?"

"I am practising upon him," says Bartolomeo, "but my lord is all sugar and spice in that direction, promising him God knows what in the way of loot so soon as the city be fallen."

"Didst remember me to him?"

"Aye, but he said business was business, and that if he were to be reasonable, Simone must be the like, instead of cheering these louts on to strike folk over the head with—"

The bell for guard change struck in the gate tower—one stroke, whose sound betrayed the weakness of the arm that swung the hammer.

"Wine abates fury," says I hastily. "Especially wine on an empty stomach, Bartolomeo. Think of that, and also how I gave thee water out of a dock leaf after the charge at Pontresina. Good night."

AND SEEMINGLY he did so think; for the next night, about the second hour and when the moon was dark, what should come up to the south gate but one of the carts aforesaid; its wheels creaking, its oxen blowing through their noses as they swung their heads from side to side; and its three delectable barrels straining under their ropes. Bartolomeo was with it. His face fell, like those of the four soldiers with him, as he looked at the crowd of living corpses that had responded to the alarm.

"*Dio mio!*" he said, staring at them in oblivion of Simone's demand what this meant. It was the first time he had seen our population whenas it was not attempting his life, which attempts are likely to bias a man against even the most pitiful of creation. "*Dio mio doloroso!*"

"Ye bring us wine?" asks Simone who, from fever and starvation, was himself no pretty spectacle. Bartolomeo looked at him and, but for the etiquette governing such matters, might have burst into tears.

"Aye, aye, old friend," says he hoarsely. "In the name of the Compassionate! And if I'm hanged for it, it may atone for some of the things—"

Now Simone, weakened past much care for appearances, flung his arms about

Bartolomeo and kissed him on both cheeks; and the populace was staggering forward to do likewise, when Bartolomeo remembered his captaincy.

"None of this nonsense," says he gruffly, pushing Simone away. "I must get back with yon cart before I'm reported absent. Help unload, you dogs on the horses. Am I to work while soldiers sit at ease? And you, starvelings, remember this, and cease your obstinacy. Your lord is a very—"

But the words stuck in his throat.

"Nay, I can not advise them so," he said in a low voice to me. "Better starve to death than be ruled by—that. And, my God, Luigi, one would say they were dead already!"

"Aye. Almost."

"I had the devil's own job begging it," says Bartolomeo, rolling the unbandaged eye uneasily about, "and—and—Luigi, I had a cold feeling in my heart that he knew wherefor I wanted the stuff."

"Madness!"

"I think his mother flirted with the devil," says Bartolomeo, wiping his chin. "Now then, are we to be all night at this and hanged in the morning? Hasten, hasten!"

So he went, and the gate was closed; and while the people ran hither and yon to seek hammers for the knocking of heads off the barrels, Simone began to draw me away toward our own quarters.

"But," says I, "they are opening the barrels, and—"

"Just so," says he, "and we are going to bed. At least thou art. I'll take the watch. We are to have none of that wine, Luigi."

"But—"

"No buts. This is our trade. We are paid for hardship, and it is not seemly that we should endure less of it than those who pay us. We have eaten more than they—if for their own good—this fortnight past. We can do without luxury. Any man of the troop that touches that wine, I hang. Thee either. Dost understand?"

It was cruel; it was torture; it was torment. From my bed I could hear the folk tottering toward the south gate as the news of the benefaction spread; nay, and their dippers clashing when they got there; and it was a sleepless night for me. And when I arose, my eyes staring sorely at a bright morning, behold not more than half the new guard presented itself for posting. What there was, moreover, seemed nearer dead today even than it had been the day before.

"Drinking and guzzling," says I to the poor wretches, the idea being to stimulate them by harsh words. "Your heads ache this morning. Let it be a lesson in—"

At this point, one at the end of the line dropped his crossbow and fell over; a proceeding by no means unusual since the meat ration had been reduced to mice; but, being raised to his feet, this fellow rolled his head strangely from side to side and moaned in a manner not customary. He was taken to his house; I checked, with certain sharp words about intemperance, any tendency on the part of others to imitate his example, posted the guards, and went about my business. There was an assault in the afternoon, which we repulsed with more difficulty than usual; and at the end of it one of Vitali's men managed to reach my arm with a pike.

While I was bandaging which wound with the tail of my only shirt, Simone burst into my quarters.

"Luigi!"

"Aye?"

"Poison!"

I stared at him, my backbone growing cold. He shook me violently by the shoulder.

"Poison!" he said again, fell into a chair and covered his face with his hands. As for me, I dropped my bit of rag and ran out into the street, forgetful of my bleeding.

It was even so. What hell brew had been mixed with the wine, I know not to this day; but it was something of slow action which had been spurred on, so to say, by the exercise of the assault. Four men and one woman were lying dead in that street; and just at the moment of my appearance, there staggered forth another man from a house, hands at stomach and face of the death green. At sight of me he raised his voice in a hoarse shout of "Traitor!" and pitched headlong into the kennel, where he writhed.

My Lord, I can not describe the rest of that awful dusk. There is a white patch in my hair which (disliking to speak to your Grace of family matters, and being besides bound by an oath since dissolved) I ascribed to an old wound; it was then that patch appeared. Not from a wound, either, though enough stiffening hands were raised against me as I ran through the streets in search of a physician, a herb woman, a devil's magician, if need were, who might stop the moans of anguish that arose from every side.

Simone ran with me, and at him too the dying shouted "Traitor! Murderer! Poisoner!" with their last breaths. Even our own troops believed it; I could tell that from the manner in which my sergeant told me that Bartolomeo had signaled for a meeting that night.

"He—a meeting?" gasped Simone; and when he knew it was so, he grinned like a wolf. "Aye. A meeting, no doubt. How goes the hour, Sergeant?"

"Nigh to midnight."

"Say 'sir', varlet!" says I, knocking the fellow down a flight of stone stairs. "And who of the rest of you shall doubt that we knew of this, let him step hither."

"Let them follow us when we meet Bartolomeo," says Simone, twitching at my sleeve. I think he was for the time a little mad. "Maybe he designs to surprise us when we open the postern. Ha-ha! Well, they may have the city now. Empty! Empty!"

This was less than the truth; because there were at least some two or three hundred of the inhabitants who had slept through the night, or who had had no taste for wine. They were gathered now in the square by the east gate, looking up at us upon the battlements. We could see them dimly in the light of the cressets, but it was not necessary. We could hear them; I can hear them as I write this, and the hair bristles on my neck.

"He will be there now," says Simone. "Lend me thy sword, fellow. Luigi, take the sergeant's; and I charge thee, let not Bartolomeo il Bianco go back alive. Bring torches."

SO WE descended to the postern of the Via Nuova, which is now blocked up by the wall of the sweetmeat seller's shop; and as soon as it was opened, Simone sprang upon Bartolomeo and ran him through the right shoulder. He was withdrawing his blade to make better aim for the heart, when Bartolomeo swung his left fist and with it struck my captain under the ear, so that he dropped as one dead. Then, seeing me advancing upon him, he whipped out his own sword and dagger.

"Luigi!" he gasped, parrying a thrust he himself had taught me. "Art gone mad?"

Flinging me back twice a man's length—for he was strong as a bull—he entered the postern after me, guarding only and making no attempt to attack me in his turn. I saw him look over his head to the soldiers and the crowd behind me.

"Good people," he yelled, "what is this? No memory of the wine I brought ye no longer ago—"

The howl that went up encouraged me to attack still more vigorously; and the time was fast coming when in self-defense Bartolomeo must have fought in return. But, forgetful as I had been of that pike wound, it was not forgetful of me—for in those days Il Bianco could have outfenced me a dozen times over, even when I was calm. Before he could do so, however, I gave in to the loss of blood and fell face downward on the cobblestones at his feet.

"Luigi!" I heard a voice saying; and a rough hand shook me. "Luigi! Wake! Wake! Luigi!"

It was the voice of Simone. My eyes

opening, I perceived that he was bending over me, his knee under my head, and his eyes staring down into mine. In the light of the torches, they seemed to blaze. Behind him I could make out the form of Bartolomeo seated on a horse block, his head in his hands and his sword at his feet; and behind him again, there moved and muttered a fresco of the living dead. I was lying where I had fallen, in the little square where they have since built the chapel to the Virgin.

"Luigi, it was *he*. The count. He had guessed what Bartolomeo was to do. His physician was seen about the carts. Bartolomeo was come to tell us that a great assault is planned for tomorrow and that Vitali is ready to desert."

I got weakly to my feet.

"Where is the count?" I asked.

Bartolomeo arose.

"Asleep in his tent, curse him!" he yelled. "With Vitali's men and mine formed in hollow square around him, for fear of a sally at the last minute. Ha-ha! Coward! Poisoner!"

He went on to use some terms which I will not repeat to your Lordship, because of the disrespect; suffice it to say that they had a strange effect on the two or three hundred citizens who surrounded us, making them very quiet, save for a murmur that ran through them like thunder; and a stranger effect still upon Simone, who all at once began to laugh. I thought he had gone quite mad, but it was not so.

"In hollow square about him, sayest thou, Bartolomeo?" says he. "That is good. Now it is a peculiarity of the hollow square that, while it is exceedingly difficult—without the proper passwords—for any person to get inside of it, it is still more difficult for any person, being already inside, to get out."

There was silence for a moment—utter silence; in the crowd as well as between ourselves and among the soldiers. Then the crowd laughed; and surged forward.

"Aye, aye, aye," says Simone, calling our men to attention. "Let us form a column, my friends. A pleasant night for a walk; with thy permission, Bartolomeo, these citizens will go call upon their liege lord. Perhaps if thou went ahead and told the troops guarding him for what act of graciousness—executed in *thy* name—they come to thank him, a lane might be opened in yon hollow square, through which they could pass without formality. The which lane I and my men will close after them."

Bartolomeo swallowed something.

"We will follow thee after ten minutes," says Simone. "Luigi shall accompany thee in the capacity of witness, lest Vitali, for instance, should hesitate to believe that any man could have given these good folk such cause of gratitude. *A rivederci!*"

So we went, and I bore testimony before Vitali and his lieutenants; and they went and told the sergeants, who communicated the horror to their under-sergeants and they to the men; and I saw the lines of horsemen—the sleepers mounted when the matter was made clear to them—turn outward from the center of that hollow square which contained your Lordship's father his tent; and, approaching across the plain, I had just made out the tramp of our soldiers, accompanied by the shuffle of many other feet, when my wound overcame me again and I knew no more.

This time, it was longer before I awoke; perhaps because none was in frame of mind to revive me; in fact, it was broad dawning, which accounts for my inability to answer exactly the question your Lordship hath done me the honor to ask. Certainly, at my going off, the count's tent was there; and, according to the testimony of Vitali's men and Bartolomeo's, he was asleep within it. And certainly, when I was again myself in the morning, the tent was gone, and the count also; in such manner that no scrap of cloth or piece of clothing, or personal relic of him such as a fingernail or lock of hair hath ever been found to this day.

I sought information on the subject from the soldiers of all three troops, but they knew nothing, having had their backs turned toward the tents all night, and being bound beside to say naught of the matter until Bartolomeo and Giuseppe Vitali and Simone (whom God receive!) should all be dead; as now they are.

It was rumored that his Lordship might have gone on a pilgrimage, a long pilgrimage, to atone for any sins he may have chanced to commit.

Unless it is to your Lordship's advantage to think otherwise, I scarce believe that any harm could have come to his Grace from the two or three hundred citizens who were coming to visit him as I fainted.

They were so weak.

And hungry.

Kissing your Highness' hands whereon: and assuring him of my utmost endeavor in matters of the law or any other.

I am humbly the servant of your Grace,

—L. CARADOSSO

SOUP WAGON DRIVERS

By STEVE STEVENSON

UNSUNG and unproclaimed, carriers of "soup" in the Texas oil fields are nevertheless heroes, gambling their lives against death, day in and day out, year after year.

Soup in the vernacular of the oil fields is nitroglycerin. It is used by oil well drillers to loosen the oil bearing sands in order that the golden fluid will either flow to the top of the well, under its own pressure, or be easily pumped from nature's storage place.

Death lurks for the driver of a soup wagon at every turn of the wheels on the truck carrying the explosive.

A heavy jar of the soup wagon—a collision—and all that is left to tell the tale is a deep hole in the ground and splinters of what was once a three ton truck.

Not long ago a soup wagon driver missed his guess in crossing a narrow bridge near Fort Worth, Texas. The truck struck the railing of the bridge. There was a loud explosion, which was heard for many miles around. The bridge was completely demolished. Parts of the truck were discovered over a mile from the scene of the disaster. No trace of the driver, with the exception of a few pieces of clothing, was ever found.

A majority of the soup wagon drivers, who carry the nitroglycerin from the place of manufacture to the oil fields, are former cowboys. They were lured from the ranches in Texas to the oil fields by the high salaries paid to the soup wagon drivers.

The nitroglycerin companies pay the drivers of their trucks one dollar for every mile traveled while the wagon is loaded with soup.

The only speed requirement is that at least twenty-five miles be traveled every day by the driver. Any further traveling during a day's time is left to the judgment of the driver. Most of the soup trucking is done at night when there is only a small amount of traffic on the highways, which lessens the likelihood of a collision.

The drivers average $500 a month, which is eight times the average salary paid to a cowboy. Although the profession is more dangerous than hustling cows on the range, nevertheless, a soup wagon driver only works a few hours each day, while the cowboys are sometimes in the saddle for twenty hours at a stretch, which is generally during the roundup season.

Between five hundred and six hundred quarts of soup are carried on a truck at one time. It takes less than a teaspoonful of nitroglycerin properly to fill a large dynamite stick.

Restrictions in Texas cities and towns are such that soup trucks can not pass through the municipalities. One small town was practically wiped out about five years ago when a soup wagon exploded on the main street.

Overnight stops must be made by the drivers at garages on the outskirts of towns, provided owners of such garages will grant their permission for the use of the buildings.

The police officials in each town must be notified upon the arrival of a soup wagon, and guards are then placed around the garage in which the truck is parked.

A few years ago the death rate among the soup wagon drivers was extremely high. One out of five drivers employed during a six month period was killed due to the explosion of a load of soup, according to the casualty compilations.

However, better methods now prevail in the handling of nitroglycerin than a few years ago. Formerly it was packed in a somewhat careless manner, but at the present time the soup is placed in containers similar to those used for eggs. Each compartment is insulated with rubber, so that slight jolts will not cause the obliteration of driver and truck.

Drivers of soup wagons are as a general rule fatalists. They do not fear death and when one of their number becomes the victim of an explosion they only remark—

"Well, it was his time to go."

The profession of soup wagon driving is rated by insurance companies as one of the most dangerous. The companies under no circumstances will insure any man who derives his livelihood from driving a truck filled with enough explosives to blow up a small sized town or capable of wrecking sections of large cities.

One of the best known soup wagon drivers in Texas was Tex Thornton, who retired from driving wagons a few years ago to fight burning oil wells with soup.

Thornton carries nitroglycerin to the edge of burning oil wells, drops the projectile holding the soup near the well hole, and while he is running away from the well, the heat from the flames explodes the nitroglycerin and the concussion extinguishes the fire.

One slip of the hand or foot and Thornton's time to go will have arrived.

Several former soup wagon drivers have attempted to duplicate Thornton's fire fighting feats, but have either been killed by the explosions, or have returned to driving wagons after sustaining severe injuries as a result of their venture.

Among the soup wagon drivers, Charley Turrentine, who has been piloting nitroglycerin trucks for eight years, is regarded as the luckiest of all those engaged in the hazardous profession.

On five different occasions, during the eight year period, Turrentine, who lives in Wichita Falls, has escaped death by lying off and allowing a substitute driver to cover his route.

The wear, tear and strain on a soup wagon driver's nerves entitles him to several days vacation each month. And on five such vacations the driver taking Turrentine's place has been killed in a soup explosion.

All soup wagon drivers have the same opinion as Turrentine in regard to his last escape.

"It just wasn't my time to pass on. It was for the substitute."

A Novelette of the Kimberley Diamond Fields

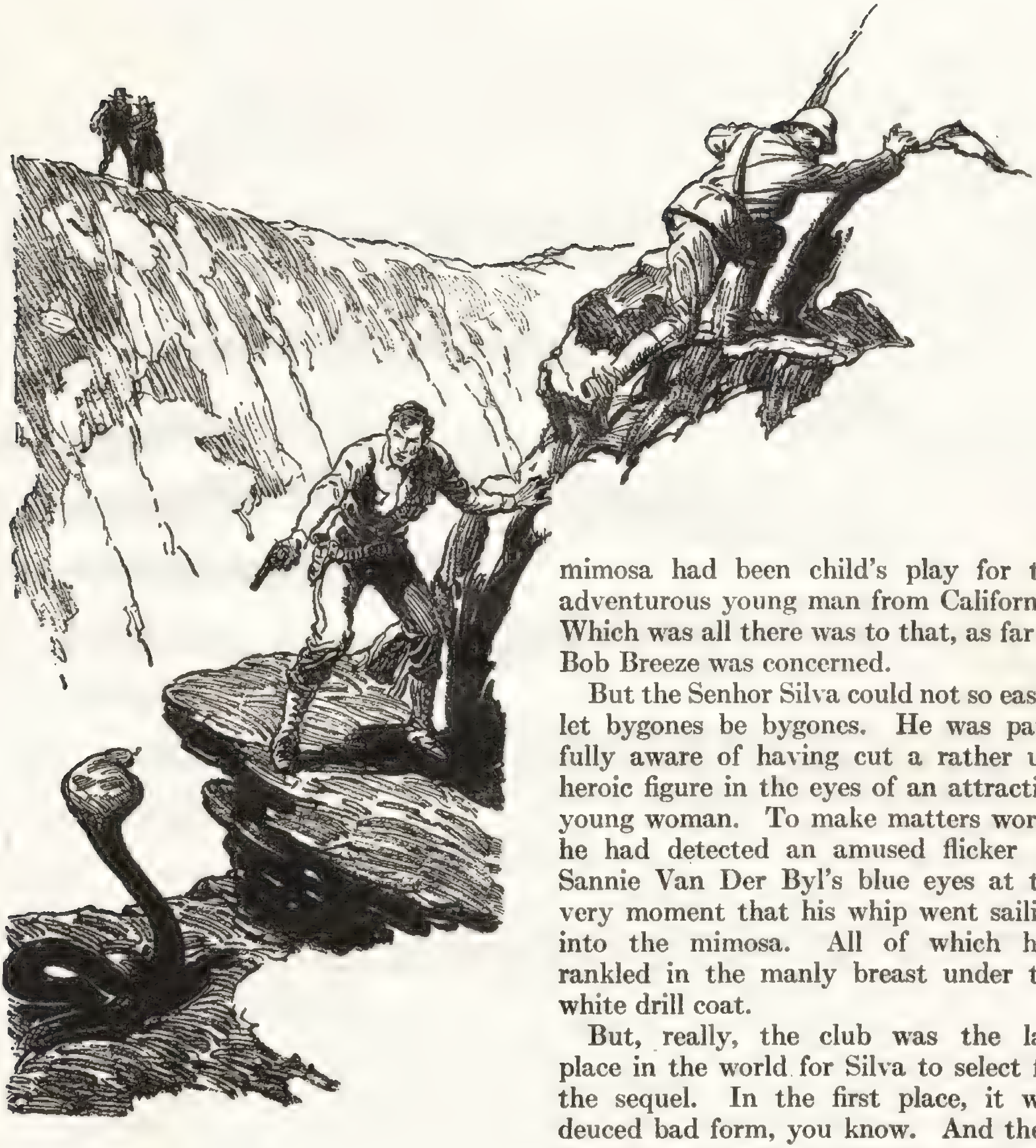
I.D.B.

A RIPPLE of applause ran the length of the crowded club veranda as the youngster from California knocked down the pride and glory of Lourenço Marques for the third and last time. Apparently the Diamondfields Club *was* interested, though it would have been an exaggeration to say that the affair had thrown the place in an uproar, as would have been the case in more settled and mellowed communities.

Kimberley, however, still harks back to its youthful pioneer tradition and usually does not take sides, or excite itself over anything less than first degree murder or the finding of a diamond weighing forty carats in the rough.

It was plain to the audience, sipping its whisky-and-soda in the cool of the evening, that the resplendent Senhor Manuel Silva, late of Portuguese East Africa, had been looking for trouble. His diligent quest had been successful, that was all. As a result the honors of the bout, such as they were, had all gone to Bob Breeze of California. No two ways about it—Senhor Silva had been served jolly well right.

It was easy to see that the American was taken by surprise in a quarrel that was not of his seeking. Oh, quite! Of course, the young chap *had* interfered earlier in the day with Silva when that "Portogreek" was exercising himself by whipping young Inyoni, his Matabele groom, within an inch of his life. But it certainly was not the fault of the American chap that Sannie Van Der Byl, the slim, blond owner of Rietfontein, happened along and had interfered in behalf of Inyoni. Silva, who ordinarily plumed



By

E. VAN LIER
RIBBINK

himself on being quite the ladies' man, had drunkenly pushed the girl aside and was raising his whip for one more soul satisfying cut at the dazed Matabele, when Bob Breeze interfered.

To disarm the fat brute and throw his hippo leather whip into a clump of mimosa had been child's play for the adventurous young man from California. Which was all there was to that, as far as Bob Breeze was concerned.

But the Senhor Silva could not so easily let bygones be bygones. He was painfully aware of having cut a rather unheroic figure in the eyes of an attractive young woman. To make matters worse, he had detected an amused flicker in Sannie Van Der Byl's blue eyes at the very moment that his whip went sailing into the mimosa. All of which had rankled in the manly breast under the white drill coat.

But, really, the club was the last place in the world for Silva to select for the sequel. In the first place, it was deuced bad form, you know. And then, also, it was a tactical blunder on his part to seek his revenge on the veranda of the Diamondfields Club that night. For here, in this *entourage* of big, easy going, quiet spoken men of the northwest European stock, Boer as well as Briton, there was much tolerance and little liking for men of the Silva breed.

Of course, the Afro-Portuguese was always treated with punctilious courtesy whenever he came to the club. But, though he did not realize it, that was exactly the trouble. The less a white man is liked in places like Kimberley, the more politely is he dealt with. There comes a time, at last, when such politeness reaches the freezing point, and then things are liable to happen.

When Silva appeared at the club that evening in the company of a brother "Portogreek"—for thus are men of a certain degree of swarthiness styled in Africa—Bob Breeze was enjoying the starlit night that follows dusty day on the Kalahari. As a rule Kimberley is remembered for its nights, its days being nothing to write home about. At night the Southern Cross stands radiant over the *karoo* and the Kalahari and, given a bright moon, even Kimberley with its big hole where the diamonds are dug, its zinc and iron Kaffir shanties and dusty roads, is transformed into a beautiful and romantic Golconda.

On the wide porch the phlegmatic exiles from England, home and beauty, as well as their former foes, the tall Boers of the *achterveld*, or back country, mingled with a smattering of all the nations. This evening, as on others, they were seated around small iron tables, or reclined lazily in steamer chairs. A few who had dined at the club, wore "smoking," but most were comfortable in suits of white drill or cream *tussur.*

Silva and his friend made their way to a table adjoining that of the American. Absorbed in his surroundings, Bob failed to notice them. This was natural, for he had but recently caught his first glimpse of Table Mountain, spread with its cloth of clouds, and to him all South Africa was still new and glamourous.

His present company was well worth observing, since it represented every type known to the veld—from engineers and transport riders in khaki, immaculate civil servants who yet affected the Oxford drawl, and leather faced veterans of the Zulu and Matabele wars, to *ci-devant* Chartered Company troopers who had raided with daredevil Doctor Jim on his mad ride from Rhodesia into the Transvaal. Their talk too was new to American ears, for it ranged from the discovery of blue earth diamond pipes, and the opening of new territory hitherto reserved for native tribes, to Kaffir wars and hunting.

Silva and his companion had at last seated themselves, and the American favored them with a cursory glance which carried no recognition. Senhor Silva had dressed up for his appearance at the club, and his sartorial *tout-ensemble* proved fearful and wonderful in the extreme. The waxed ends of the man's mustachios stood out like the points of a Zulu *assegai,* and he sported a white waistcoat, heavy watch chain and expensive panama.

Large solitaires flashed on his pudgy fingers, and another huge stone sparkled in his flaming tie. This plethora of diamonds in a place like Kimberley, where you dig for the gems, but do not wear them, was another inarticulate cause for Silva's unpopularity. It lent color to the report that the Portogreek owed his affluence to a brisk trade in illicit diamonds.

Silva noisily ordered drinks for two, and then, in a loud voice, launched into a highly colored description of his encounter with a "damned fortune hunting Yankee." Apparently he was unconscious of the fact that the Yankee in question was seated within earshot. And it was only after he had commenced to embellish his remarks with sulphurous references to Yankees who posed as heroes of romance in order to win favor in the eyes of South African maidens of great wealth, that Silva appeared to notice a sudden hush in the conversation of those occupying adjoining tables.

At the same time a heavy hand fell on his shoulder. Even then Silva did not betray any great degree of surprise. On the contrary, his fat face wore a triumphant smile as he looked up into the tense features of the young American who, in a low voice, was inviting him to "get up and be damned quick about it!"

Silva seemed in no hurry to comply with the request. The color of his face now matched that of his flaming tie, and the man almost suffocated in his eagerness to give tongue to the many original forms of insult that crowded a rather unclean mind. At last—

"American swine!" He spat.

Bob's hand shot out and grasped Silva's heavy red neck. The next instant the Portogreek was lifted bodily from his chair and dragged into the open.

Here three bearded transport riders were lucky enough to have ringside seats. A club steward, mindful of the dignity of the place, shouted an admonitory, "Gentlemen, gentlemen!" and made a half hearted attempt to interfere, but was barred by the outstretched arm of a tall, rather slovenly dressed Boer. Kimberley, it was apparent, had taken a hand in the game and meant to see fair play.

It was not a very spirited or a very lengthy affair. Releasing his man, Bob Breeze drew back, then knocked him down. Raging like a devil, Silva came to his feet, knife in hand. A blow on the point of his chin sent him sprawling. The knife clattered to the ground and was kicked under a table by one of the sportsmen present. Silva rose and, rather groggily, returned to the charge. Again that smashing contact of his chin with what seemed to be a large hammer wielded with uncanny force and artistry. Down he went into oblivion, and remained there until lifted to his feet. The next moment he was flung down the garden steps and disappeared into the night.

"*BANJE MOOI*—very pretty but look out, young fellow! Those Portogreeks don't take kindly to that sort of thing. Better let me walk home with you tonight."

Bob turned and looked into a pair of amused blue eyes set in a face like tanned leather. A huge hand was held out for him to shake.

"My name is Snyman, and I came here to caution you against that yellow hyena," the stranger introduced himself.

The American looked his surprise. Who in Kimberley had sufficient interest in his affairs to warn him against Silva?

Snyman saw his bewilderment and smiled broadly. He explained:

"I am Miss Van Der Byl's ranch manager at Rietfontein. She told me what happened in town this morning, and says that Silva looked black murder when you interfered. Sometime ago that yellow Portogreek had the nerve to come snooping around Rietfontein. Wanted to marry Miss Sannie, if you please, like any one of a dozen better men I could name. But she sent him packing! And now you've made him look silly in her eyes, and in the eyes of all Kimberley.

"I got here just in time to see Silva take the count. Man, that was a neat job, but I was afraid you were in for a ripped hide when he whipped out his knife. I was the fellow that kicked it under the table. Oh, don't thank me; it was a pleasure. Had my gun handy too, just in case he got to carving you up too much. That's all."

Bob wrung the big Boer's hand.

"Thanks," he said. "Three cheers for our side. But I don't think Silva will try any more monkey business after this. We've had two scraps now, and he's been loser each time."

Snyman shook his head dubiously.

"You don't know those Portogreeks," he said. "Anyhow, I'm going to see you as far as the hotel."

Bob was glad of the Boer's company, for he felt rather lonely and lost in Kimberley. To tell the truth, the far famed city of diamonds had been a disappointment. For he had soon found out that all the worthwhile jobs on the diamond mines are preempted before the appointees ever come out from England and that, therefore, such a thing as picking up work by the wayside, as it were, is almost impossible in South Africa, however common it may be in the States.

As they walked along Snyman talked of Rietfontein, the six thousand *morgen* ranch on the edge of the sun dried Kalahari, which Sannie Van Der Byl had inherited from her father. The place, he said, was a *vogelstruis boerdery*, or ostrich farm, where in former years several thousand heads of the finest birds had been bred. Rietfontein itself, Snyman believed, was as rich in diamond bearing blue earth pipes as De Beer's and Dutoitspan had proved to be, and a *pyp* was said to run right under the foundations of the brick ranch-house itself.

"Then why not dig up the old place and get at the sparklers?" the American asked in his practical way.

Snyman shrugged his shoulders and laughed.

"*Allemachtig!* But it is easy to see you are a newcomer. Here, around Kimberley, nobody but the syndicate mines for diamonds. It is only along the Vaal River that the little fellows wash the banks for diamonds, and it is quite a sight, believe me, when one of the poor devils finds a sparkler."

They had reached the hotel, and Snyman took his leave, inviting the American to ride over to the ranch in the morning.

"I'm sure the boss would like to have you come," he said hospitably.

Bob rode out to Rietfontein bright and early the next morning. It was his first closeup of the African veld, and he gave his horse a free rein in the direction pointed out by Snyman. The veld was green and dotted with patches of wild flowers, for the first rains had fallen. Presently, skirting a small Kaffir *kraal*, where women with coal black babies slung on their nude backs in bright blankets, were hoeing the sparse mealie fields, he came to an iron gate set in a fence that appeared to wind for miles across the plain. This, he had been told, was the entrance to Rietfontein.

Entering the gate, he followed the road over a low *kopje* and from this eminence saw the ranch-house below, a flat roofed structure entirely surrounded by a wide porch. Evidently his approach was observed, for a girl's slender figure appeared in the garden fronting the house.

She waved her hand gaily.

"Welcome to the *plaats*," she called. "Here, Inyoni, take care of the horse of the Baas!"

A young native came running, and Bob recognized the stripling he had saved from Silva's whip. The girl noticed his surprise.

"Yes," she said, "the poor fellow did not want to return to his employer after what had happened. So I gave him *sebenza* here."

Leading the way into the house, she spoke of Silva's animosity.

"I was afraid he would try to pick another quarrel with you," she said frankly. "That's why I asked Snyman to go over and warn you. Silva is a vindictive brute, so I was not surprised to hear what happened last night at the club."

The American shrugged a careless shoulder. The Portuguese, he said, had done his worst.

"I am not so sure of that," the girl answered dubiously. "You see, we warned him off the *plaats* once before when he bothered me with his attentions, and now that you are visiting here—"

She stopped in confusion, as if suddenly aware of the construction that might be placed on her words, and colored. Then she rose briskly.

"Come, let me show you over the place!"

They passed through the garden, which was fragrant with aloe and fringed with a hedge of wild rose, into an adjoining grove of oranges. The ostrich paddocks stretched beyond.

At sight of the girl several of the long necked, gawky legged birds came racing up. Sannie turned to her companion.

"They are pets—" she laughed— "and I often feed them sugar and chocolates. That gives me a good alibi for buying so many sweets. No, I don't keep the ostriches for the sake of the feathers. You see, the bottom has dropped out of the feather market. But my father loved the birds, and that's why I let them run around the paddocks, instead of having them killed off, as many ostrich farmers in the Cape Colony are doing now."

As they turned back to the ranch-house the girl asked many questions about California. She intended to visit the United States some day herself, she declared.

Bob at last reluctantly rose to go. The thought of returning to Kimberley all alone had become strangely distasteful to him.

"May I come again?" he asked, with what was for him a rather unusual humility.

For a fleeting second her eyes looked questioningly into his. She hesitated, then smiled.

"You certainly may. We Boers always keep open house—for our friends. Please come often, and beware of Silva. You don't know him as we do."

Inyoni had brought his horse around to the front. As Bob rode off he carried with him a vision of the girl as she stood waving her hand at him—a fitting girl for a garden of aloe and wild rose. He was certainly becoming interested in South Africa.

DETECTIVE SERGEANT DANIELS of the Kimberley Police, in charge of the Illicit Diamond Buying Bureau, vulgarly known as the I. D. B. shop, was seated at his official desk. The weather was hot, and the sergeant's uniform coat, his pistol holster and helmet reposed untidily on a corner of his desk.

Daniels was a huge man, of the full blooded type which, doctors say, is given to apoplexy in warm weather and should therefore avoid mental stress or excitement. However, on this occasion the sergeant was not heeding the instructions of his medical adviser, for he was decidedly in a vile humor.

Having dismissed an unfortunate Shangaan corporal, who had displeased him, with contumely in three languages, Sergeant Daniels lighted a cigar, took three puffs at it and threw it out of the window. Next he produced from a small cupboard a large bottle of Holland's *jenever* and poured himself a stiff drink. He tried to swallow the liquor in one gulp, and was still coughing violently, when the door of the office opened and Silva entered. Daniels turned and, seeing who it was, scowled, then swore briefly—

"Hell, what do *you* want?" he asked.

The detective officer's harsh language and his hard eye did not visibly affect the visitor. Instead of cringing as Daniels' underlings had done, Silva lowered his huge bulk into a chair, the while he wiped his face and casually remarked:

"Not feeling so good today, are you? Well, now, isn't that too bad? What's up —lost any more of next year's pay at poker? Or is it the red and black soup plate with the little ball this time?"

Daniels grew purple at this playful reference to his gambling propensities. He swung around at his tormentor—

"*Tula!*"

The word alone was an insult. It means "shut up" in the Zulu language, and no white man ever employs it to another unless he means to give mortal offense. Its use is reserved exclusively to excoriate Kaffirs, Kalahari bushmen and Hottentots.

But Silva did not mind. He smiled unpleasantly, and simply looked at the police officer. For some reason this seemed to irritate Daniels beyond measure, for he exploded without warning:

"*Verdomd!* Get out of here, you dirty Mozambique rat. I suppose you've come to badger me for money. Get out before I lay my whip on your yellow hide and cut it to pieces. Do you want me to repeat the dose you got the other night from that young American? Oh, yes, I heard all about it, you yellow jackal!"

Silva turned livid. He gripped the sides of his chair and snarled:

"That'll do, Sergeant! Don't say another word—it's dangerous. Better hear what I've got to say."

His expression was so ferocious, and he spoke with such deadly rage and menace as to render Daniels speechless. The policeman's domineering attitude vanished as he stared at the Portuguese.

When he spoke again, it was almost meekly:

"All right. No offense meant. Spit it out. What do you want of me?"

Silva came to the point without mincing words:

"You owe me money. Lots of it. More than you can ever pay out of your measly salary. And I can break you! One word to De Beer's, one flash of the notes you have signed—out you go!"

Daniels was struck dumb. The worm had turned. The policeman's big hands itched to get a grip on Silva's throat, but he did not dare. The man had spoken the truth; he had the upper hand.

Silva fixed him with a malevolent eye.

"Yes, I will break you, damn you! Unless you pay me right now, or do as I tell you '

Daniels recovered his composure.

"And what may that be?" he asked jeeringly. "Am I to look the other way while you ship a parcel of I. D. B. diamonds out of the country? All right, I'll do it, but first you tear up these notes of mine."

Silva shook his head.

"No, that's not what I want of you. In fact, this time I happen to be on the side of law and order." He laughed nastily. "Don't be surprised, my friend, but I'm going to help you arrest an illicit diamond buyer—that is all! And then, after you have your man lodged in jail, I will tear up those notes of yours, but not before. Fair enough, don't you think?"

Daniels nodded.

"I see. You want to get rid of a competitor. Well, you and I may do business, provided you hand over those notes. But, mind you, the thing has got to be within the law. I don't want to run any risk. Who is the man? And what is your evidence against him?"

Silva laughed and rubbed his hands.

"Who is he? Why, you mentioned him a minute ago. Who should it be but that damned Yankee you spoke of?"

Daniels jumped to his feet.

"The American! I might have guessed it. But I can not see how you're going to pin anything on him. That chap Breeze has been only a few days in Kimberley, and doesn't know the first thing about the illicit diamond racket. You haven't a bit of evidence against him."

Silva shrugged his shoulders.

"Don't be a fool, *amigo.* I'll help you get the evidence. That's easy."

Daniels stared. Then he whispered—

"You mean to trap him?"

"Of course. What could be simpler? Your police boys do it every day. What else do you employ Kaffir traps for? The Yankee ought to be easy to handle, for he's such a greenhorn that he has probably never heard of our South African I. D. B. law! We'll show that cursed American a trick or two. I heard today that he has been visiting at Rietfontein! Oh, he's quite the handsome hero there. But we'll make a jailbird out of him and see what happens. Well, are you with me?"

The sergeant hesitated.

"I don't like it, Silva. The fellow is an American, and he is sure to yell for his consul when we arrest him."

"Let him yell," Silva jeered. "The Yankee consulate is at Jo'burg, which is a long way off. And you know that after we trap him with an uncut stone and can show that he bought it off a Kaffir on De Beer's property, or near it, the magistrate will send him over fast enough, for that precious syndicate has *got* to be protected at all costs! And after we get the American thrown into jail he may holler his head off. As to your notes, you have my word that I'll tear 'em up as soon as the arrest is made."

Daniels sat turning the matter over in his mind. Then he reached a decision.

"All right, I'll go through with it. But remember to hand over those I. O. U's. If you don't—" His voice trailed off menacingly.

Silva beamed and placed a fleshy hand on the policeman's arm.

"You are a smart fellow, Sergeant," he wheezed. "And now we will have a leetle drink. Let us walk over to the bar and plan how we shall spring the trap. Yes?"

Daniels shook him off impatiently.

"Help yourself out of the bottle," he invited ungraciously. "But I am not going to drink with you in a pub. Think I'm crazy? The less you and I are seen together, the better."

THE DAY following his visit to Rietfontein Bob was again out on horseback. Somehow all his plans had changed overnight, and so had his outlook on life and his appreciation of Kimberley. Only twenty-four hours had passed, yet he had now decided to stay in the diamond metropolis and land himself a job of some kind. And he frankly admitted to himself that it was Sannie Van Der Byl who had changed his mind for him—that the magic of her eyes was responsible for the sudden liking he had taken to Kimberley and the Kalahari Desert.

That the girl was an heiress in her own right he knew, but it would have made no difference had she been a barmaid behind one of Kimberley's long counters. She was to him just Sannie, the personification of Kipling's lines, "For she is South Africa, our South Africa, South Africa all over!"

He became aware of having unconsciously guided his horse in the direction of the ranch. This would never do. He turned and rode back to Kimberley, entering the town through the long avenue of huts and shanties of the native location, where the Kaffir women live, whose men are employed in the mines.

The native miners themselves reside in temporary separation from their families in the well guarded compounds which no Kaffir employed by De Beer is allowed to leave until his period of indenture is over. At the end of that period the Kaffir miner is thoroughly prodded and gone over for any diamonds he may have hidden, for many are the tricks which the natives employ to smuggle diamonds out of the compounds to the illicit traders beyond the barbed wire fences.

Bob guided his horse carefully through the maze of Kaffir huts. He had just turned to avoid trampling two nude pickaninnies, when he found his way barred by a weazened old Kaffir, whose face was seamed with a thousand wrinkles and whose woolly hair had turned the color of dirty cotton. He was wrapped in a filthy blanket, and he held up a trembling, bony hand to attract the white man's attention. His other hand held a greasy *kirie,* or stick of native *stink* wood.

Smiling at the old scarecrow's woebegone appearance, Bob drew up his horse.

"What's the matter, Grandpa?" he inquired. "Speak slowly and maybe I'll get what you are driving at."

Croaking like a raven, "Grandpa" became quite voluble. He had something to sell. Something of very great value, he insisted querulously, with a crafty gleam in his little black eyes. Would the Baas buy it?

The fellow's air of mystery intrigued the American. What could this trembling bag of bones have to sell? He decided to humor him.

"What have you got?" he asked.

The Kaffir seemed in no hurry to display his wares.

"The Baas wants *mali?*" he whined.

The American did not understand.

"What do you mean—*mali?*" he asked impatiently. "Spit it out, Grandpa."

The old Kaffir blinked his eyes.

"The Baas wants much money?" he asked.

With dramatic suddenness he drew his hand from the folds of his blanket and produced a small skin pouch. Peering into the white man's face, he opened the pouch and shook something into the palm of his hand.

Bob looked and gasped. He had seen diamonds in the rough at the San Francisco World's Fair, but never one like this. Unpolished, it seemed like a lump of rock salt as big as a pigeon's egg, yet even so it reflected the rays of the sun. His hands shook as he touched it. Here was something which experienced men of the veld searched for all their lives. And here a Kaffir came crawling from a hut and offered to sell the splendid gem to him, a newcomer!

Bob at last found his voice.

"How much?" he asked. "And where did you find it?"

The Kaffir looked at him craftily, then replied, business-like:

"You buy *diamant* for ten pounds.

Then I show you place where there is *banje diamant.*"

Ten pounds sterling. Only fifty dollars in American money. Bob shrugged his shoulders. To the Kaffir it must mean riches.

He removed the belt in which, in good old Western fashion, he kept his money. But the old Kaffir, evidently fearful of a belting, misinterpreted the gesture and started to run. The American stopped him.

"Wait a minute!" he called. "I'll buy your diamond. Here's the money."

Hurriedly he counted ten gold pieces into the Kaffir's palm. The latter handed the white man the diamond and watched with a sardonic expression on his black face as Bob wrapped the gem in his handkerchief.

The American could still hardly believe his good fortune. He turned to the Kaffir—

"And now show me where you found that diamond."

A rasping voice suddenly spoke up from behind his back:

"Yes, suppose he does. And be good enough to let us come to the party also."

Bob whirled around and found himself looking into the business end of a revolver. Behind the gun stood a big man in uniform, and beside this personage, grinning like a hyena and rubbing his hands in a frenzy of delight, stood Silva himself.

For a second no one spoke. Then the American asked quietly:

"What is this? A holdup?"

The man in uniform flashed his badge.

"Sergeant Daniels of the De Beers Police," he said curtly. "Hand over that illicit diamond."

"Illicit diamond?"

The American seemed puzzled. He glanced sharply at the Kaffir, but that worthy had turned and was shambling off. Sergeant Daniels made no attempt to stop him.

"Yes, illicit diamond, I said," snapped the policeman. "Will you hand it over, or must I frisk you for it?"

Bob fumbled in his pocket and produced the stone. Sergeant Daniels glanced at it perfunctorily. He knew it well, for it had served a similar purpose, time and again, in trapping would-be buyers. Nonchalantly slipping the gem in his pocket, he drew out a pair of handcuffs. The American clenched his fists, and stepped back.

"Am I under arrest?"

"Yes, you are. For illicit diamond buying. Hold out your hands."

Bob deliberately stuck his hands in his pockets:

"No call to put those things on me. I will come along quietly—without hurting you. But tell me this—since when is it a crime to buy diamonds?"

Daniels rapidly passed experienced hands over the prisoner. Then, satisfied that his captive did not carry firearms, he jeered:

"Listen to the innocent Yank! Next thing he'll tell us he never heard of any I. D. B. law. To hell with the conversation! Tell it to the magistrate. And now, trek!"

Silva, throughout the entire episode, had seemed convulsed with glee, but had kept his distance. The fellow's presence convinced Bob that he was the victim of a cleverly laid plot.

A Cape cart and mules waited nearby.

"Get in," Daniels commanded.

To Silva he said curtly—

"Report as a witness at the magistrate's court."

He jumped into the cart and seated himself, revolver in hand, beside the prisoner. The Capeboy driver flourished his whip, and Bob Breeze found himself bound for a South African prison.

IN THE nature of things, jails and police courts the world over reflect the seamy side of life. Yet there are jails and jails. Prisons in the older, more settled lands, have come to be standardized affairs, boasting of the same steel doors, concrete walls, collapsible iron cots, and all the other harsh attributes of society's final safeguard.

But for a picturesque, old fashioned prison—for a jail that reflects the bizarre life and color of a raw continent, the temporary lockup adjoining the court room of a South African magistrate remains remarkable. And Bob Breeze, seated on a wooden bench in such a jail, was yet irresponsible enough to barter the introspective study of his own troubles for an interested survey of his present surroundings.

Near him sat an elderly native, whose brown-black skin indicated that a dash of Hottentot blood had been mixed with the Bantu strain. Immediately upon the white man's appearance, this worthy had begged him for a smoke. Bob had handed him a cigaret, which the chocolate-and-cream colored one was now smoking.

A little farther two young Kaffirs bucks devoted themselves to the original African game of crap shooting. Seated on the cowdung floor, they used oxbones for dice.

In a corner a Basuto medicine man was applying a lotion of his own concoction to the face of a young Shangaan, who had been all battered up in one of the many tribal fights waged among the Kaffirs in the mining areas. From the lean body of the medicine man innumerable small skin bags were suspended, in which he kept his medicinal herbs and grasses, the panacea for snake bite.

Bob had passed the night in a cell by himself, for a white man is a white man for all that in South Africa, and even in prison the color line is carefully drawn.

Early in the morning a guard had brought him bread and coffee. When the American announced that he wanted to consult an attorney, the guard had led him to a small office in which a seedy, fat individual was taking a nap, leaning back in a swivel chair, with his feet cocked on the table. This personage, Bob was given to understand, was an eminent attorney, who was in the habit of visiting the police court to see what grist there might be for his mill.

Though unfavorably impressed with the down at heel appearance of counsel, the American stated his case. The lawyer thereupon had given his opinion that Bob was in "a damned, messy pickle," and had proceeded to discourse on the niceties of the I. D. B. law, which makes the purchase of uncut diamonds a serious felony. True enough, his American client had evidently been trapped or framed! But the use of police traps had been sanctified by law in South Africa, so what would you? However, counsel would do his best. He held out an unsteady, grimy hand and requested a retainer.

But Bob realized that the eminent legal luminary was, notwithstanding the early hour, already thoroughly inebriated. So he handed over five shillings as payment for legal advice and was taken back to jail. Afterward he heard that the man had indeed been a noted lawyer at the Cape in his palmy days. Then drink got the better of him, and he had come to Kimberley, where he haunted the police courts, offering advice to black and white alike, at a shilling a throw.

It was almost noon before a policeman appeared in the doorway and beckoned to the American.

"The *Landdrost*—judge—will hear your case first," he said. "Better make a clean breast of it, lad, and try for the minimum. Sorry we had to herd you with the Kaffirs for a few hours, but we have no other place. You'll be better off in prison; there we keep the whites by themselves."

The man meant it kindly enough, but his words sounded ominous. Evidently a jail sentence was a foregone conclusion for any one charged with I. D. B.

The courtroom was not crowded. The judge, an elderly, preoccupied man, did not look up from his papers when the prisoner was brought in. Both Daniels and Silva were on hand. So, huddled in his blankets in a corner of the room, was the native from whom Bob had bought the diamond.

The clerk of the court now began rattling off the indictment. Though he slurred the words, Bob caught various references to a conspiracy to violate the act governing the purchase of diamonds and the like.

Detective Sergeant Daniels was called to the stand and, being sworn, made a lengthy statement. The prisoner had been under surveillance ever since he came to Kimberley. He had shown a more than casual interest in the diamond industry and had sought employment at De Beer's. Failing this, accused began to haunt the Kaffir locations and spread the word among the natives that he would pay handsomely for smuggled diamonds. Furthermore, the prisoner had familiarized himself with the surroundings of Kimberley and the diamond mines. He had made several trips on horseback through the Kaffir locations, and into the veld beyond.

Throughout it all he was shadowed, until at last the fact became established that, beyond doubt, he was the emissary of a powerful group of buyers of illicit diamonds, which had its headquarters abroad, probably in America. In this connection, Sergeant Daniels ventured to draw the court's attention to the fact that of recent months uncut diamonds had been smuggled into the United States in ever increasing quantities.

At this point the magistrate looked up and wearily requested Daniels to come to the point. Almost everything he had said thus far, the court held, was extraneous, circumstantial and irrelevant. He would have to submit direct evidence, or the case would be dismissed.

Though it was plain that Daniels did not relish the reprimand, he submitted with what grace he could. His intention, he declared, was "to sketch the background of the case, and thus lead up to the causes which had prompted him to obtain the actual evidence."

The magistrate glanced from Daniels to the prisoner.

"I see," he said dryly. "It is just another case of trapping." There was a world of meaning in his voice. "Well, go ahead. Did the prisoner fall into the pit you dug for him?"

Daniels grew purple.

"Your Worship is aware that the trap system is recognized as the only possible means by which to obtain evidence of illicit diamond buying in these cases?" he asked impudently.

The magistrate considered him calmly.

"Yes," he said, "I am aware of that. What is more, I consider it a sad blot on our jurisprudence. It is bad for the morale of all of us," he added sardonically, "for the prisoners, as well as the police. Please proceed!"

Daniels drew a deep breath. There were many things that he would like to tell a magistrate who did not hesitate to show the contempt in which he held the diamond fields police and their methods of obtaining evidence. But he knew there was such a thing as contempt of court, and the knowledge made him circumspect.

He turned and beckoned to the decrepit old Kaffir.

"Take the witness stand, Umjala," he ordered.

The native hobbled to the stand. Evidently he had been there before. In a few words, like a parrot repeating a lesson, he stated that the *umlungu*—white man—had bought from him an uncut diamond, for which he had paid ten pounds in gold.

Here Daniels produced the amount named and placed it, together with the diamond, in evidence on the clerk's desk.

The magistrate looked his disgust.

"And who were witnesses to this precious transaction?" he demanded.

Daniels hesitated for just a second, then spoke up brazenly.

"I was there myself," he said, "and so was Senhor Manuel Silva."

The magistrate shrugged his shoulders.

"Well," he conceded grudgingly, "such as it is, it is evidence, and under the law you seem to make out a case. Let Silva take the stand."

The Portogreek walked to the witness chair with sleek and self-satisfied aplomb, not noting the fleeting glance of dislike which the bench bestowed on him.

Yes, he had witnessed the transaction. But, certainly the American had bought the stone. Moreover, the accused was well known among the Kaffirs as an I. D. B. merchant.

At this point his testimony was cut short by the judge, who observed that undoubtedly the witness was an authority on illicit diamond buying. Having delivered himself of this bit of sarcasm, the magistrate turned to Bob Breeze.

"Please take the stand," he directed, not unkindly.

Bob told his story in a straightforward manner. He admitted having bought the diamond, but denied being a professional I. D. B. The thought of buying diamonds had never entered his head until he was solicited by the Kaffir. Being a newcomer, he had been ignorant of the South African law governing uncut diamonds. The old Kaffir simply approached him with a story of having found the diamond out on the veld and had offered to show him the spot after he had bought the stone.

The magistrate shook his head regretfully.

"I understand," he said, "but you must realize that ignorance of the law is no excuse. I have no option but to find you guilty, and I am sorry that a fine is not allowed in cases of this nature. Under the circumstances I impose upon you the shortest term the Act allows—six months! It is so directed. Next case."

THE KIMBERLEY prison, a rambling, one-story affair, comprised an unlovely group of buildings, entirely surrounded by a brick wall, topped off with an edge of broken bottles and jagged pieces of glass set in the mortar.

The roofs of the individual prison cells consisted of corrugated iron sheets, held together by screws. These iron roofs were stove hot during the day, and reflected the rays of the sun until it made the eyes smart to look at them. And the temperature of the cells below often corresponded to that of the iron roofs.

Bob Breeze, dazed at his sudden loss of freedom, had passed the afternoon alone in his cell. It would be a few days before, in accordance with regulations, he would be allowed to mingle with the other white prisoners.

In his present state of apathy it seemed that nothing mattered. Here was a sudden inglorious end to his day dreams. What a fool, what an easy mark he had been through it all. His fists clenched as he reflected how he had been framed, how quickly and completely Silva had evened the score! Here he was in a Kimberley prison, a convicted felon. And, at that, he ought to consider himself lucky, for the magistrate had imposed the shortest sentence.

But six months in a place like this—it would be like sixty years. And what about Sannie Van Der Byl? What would she think? Was it likely that she would ever hear what had become of him? I. D. B's were not of much account in Kimberley, it seemed, and when thrown in jail they were hardly missed.

The cell door opened, and a guard entered, followed by a Shangaan Kaffir carrying a small pail.

"Dinner is served," the guard announced jocularly. "Come on, brighten up, young fellow. Better men than you have been guests at this hotel, and your time will be up in six months." He grinned encouragingly and left.

Bob frowned at the dinner pail. He had not eaten since morning, and felt quite hungry. Removing the cover, he looked at the contents. Boiled mutton and bread. Plenty of water to drink, too.

"Well, here's to my first meal in jail," he said aloud.

The food tasted excellent and he ate it all. Then he stretched himself on the board that served as combination bedstead and chair and tried to sleep, which was all he could do, for darkness had fallen and his cell did not boast a lamp.

But sleep was impossible. The heat of the day still lingered under the iron roof, and his couch was of an unyielding hardness, unrelieved by the bundle of blankets spread upon it. Also he was not sufficiently hardened to worry, to turn over and go to sleep without further thought of his misfortune. Lying flat on his back, he lighted a cigaret—they had permitted him to keep his smokes and matches—and stared into the darkness of the roof above.

He had been tossing about for several hours, when suddenly he sat up with a start. What was that slight noise up there—a grating sound—suppressed but persistent? Just as if some one were at work on the iron roof. Striking a match, he stood up on the bed and held the flame close to the ceiling. No doubt about it. The sheet iron was being moved up and down. Some one was trying to lift it. He pressed his face close to the roof and asked breathlessly—

"Who's there?"

For a moment his unknown rescuer did not answer. Then the sheet iron again lifted noiselessly, and three black fingers appeared from without, gripping the edge. A whisper came to his ears—

"Baas Breeze?"

The American was dumbfounded, but his presence of mind did not desert him. He dropped the match, and whispered:

"Yes. Who is it?"

The answer came in broken English:

"Inyoni, Baas. The groom of the *nonnie* of Rietfontein. She is waiting outside the *tronk*. Baas, you push, I pull. But not too hard. *Gashle! Gashle!*"

The American was overjoyed. But he wasted no time in further conversation. Standing on the bed, he placed the palms of his hands against the ceiling and pushed steadily, taking care not to increase the pressure unduly. With a rasping noise, the sheet iron gave way at last. Some of the screws had come out. Bob held his breath. From an adjoining cell came the sound of a fellow prisoner's unmusical but powerful snoring. However, nothing stirred. Throughout the prison, it seemed, both the righteous as well as the unrighteous were fast asleep.

And now the young Matabele was slowly and silently removing an entire section of the sheet iron roof and presently a large square opening, sufficiently wide for a man to pass through, appeared overhead, disclosing the serene constellation of the Southern Cross high in a starry heaven.

Inyoni's head obscured the opening.

"Can the Baas climb out?" he inquired naively.

Bob measured the distance.

"Wait!" he whispered.

He rolled the blankets in a bundle, placed this on top of the bed, then stood on the heap. Not high enough. Jumping down, he groped about for the empty water bucket and placed it, inverted, on top the blankets. Now it would do. Kneeling down by the opening, Inyoni lowered his hands under the white man's armpits. Noiselessly, Bob drew himself up, putting forth all his strength. And then he was lying at full length on the roof of his prison with Inyoni beside him.

For a minute they remained motionless. Then Inyoni motioned to the white man, and they commenced crawling to one side.

The outer wall of the prison was not ten feet away. Always able to see like a cat in the dark, Bob now made out the means by which Inyoni had reached him—a ladder which sloped gently from the outer wall to the cell roof. Evidently this same ladder now constituted their sole avenue of escape.

The improvised bridge bent under Bob's weight, but he got across without mishap. Inyoni followed as easily and unconcernedly as if crawling over ladders at midnight was a favorite pastime with the Matabeles.

And now the ladder had to be moved and lowered to the outside of the prison. Fortunately, the night being dark and the prison being old fashioned and not provided with searchlights, the guards on the lookout tower were not subjected to the shock of seeing two men balancing a ladder on top of the prison wall in the dead of night. And a moment later the American and his rescuer were standing out in the open, looking up at the prison wall.

They laid the ladder carefully in the grass and ran toward a clump of tall *blauwgom* trees towering darkly against the smooth veld. Through the trees Inyoni led the way, until they at last emerged into the open plain beyond. Here the young Bantu stopped and whistled softly. A jovial hail from a spot close at hand answered the signal. And then Bob discerned the vague outline of a high wheeled Cape cart and mules. A moment later Sannie Van Der Byl, her eyes moist and starry in the dancing light of a carriage lantern, was holding one of his hands in both of hers. His other hand was vigorously pumped by Snyman, who was grinning with delight.

Bob tried to speak, but the girl stopped him.

"Tell us about it later," she whispered, her face so close to his that her hair brushed his cheek. "We must travel fast before they find you're gone. Jump in, quick!"

THE NEXT instant they were off, traveling at high speed across the plain, with Snyman holding the reins and Inyoni beside him. The girl and the American sat in the rear seats, sheltered by the brown canvas hood. Neither spoke, but somehow, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, her hand rested in his. She sighed and pressed her cheek against his shoulder.

"It was worth it!" Bob whispered.

She looked up.

"You mean—" Her eyes held a world of tenderness.

"Yes, I mean that this alone was worth all my troubles, including the jail sentence!" he said.

Presently she drew away and put up a restraining hand.

"This is no time for romance." She laughed. "Why, young man, you haven't even asked me where we are going. Where is your sense of responsibility?"

Bob shrugged his shoulders.

"That's a minor point. But I take it we are on our way to the nearest minister, or justice, or whoever it is in this country that exercises the functions of a marriage officer."

She blushed, then asked demurely:

"You are taking a lot for granted, aren't you? But then I suppose that I should consider what has passed as a proposal! However, we'll speak of that later. In the meantime, don't forget that you have just made one of the most sensational prison breaks in the history of the diamond fields and that the hue and cry will be raised at dawn. By that time you must be in a safe place."

Bob nodded.

"Right you are. But I am worrying about you. Don't you think they will connect you and your people with my getaway?"

The girl smiled.

"No doubt I will be suspected, and so will Snyman and Inyoni. And that's why we are *not* going to Rietfontein. They're sure to look for you at the ranch first thing in the morning, for Silva will tell them that we were—shall we say friends?"

Bob was puzzled.

"Then where *are* we going?" he wondered.

She laughed delightedly.

"You'll never guess!" She pointed at Inyoni. "That boy is not what he seems to be. And it is mighty fortunate for us that he is not just a Kaffir menial and owes you a debt of gratitude for saving him from Silva's whip. Let me introduce Inyoni! Behold in him the son of Dabulamanzi, the *induna* or chieftain of a tribe of the Matabele, which has wandered south from Matabeleland and has settled in the Kalahari. It is to their town that we are now taking you. There you will be safe, for it is not likely that any one will dream of connecting Inyoni with such a great chief as Dabulamanzi."

Bob was amazed. He looked his unbelief, and the girl smiled.

"Oh, it sounds far fetched, I know. To think of Inyoni, whom you saved from a beating, being the son of an *induna*. But, you know, it is quite the usual thing among the Bantu chiefs to send their heirs to work incognito among the white men. Lobengula, the king of the Matabele, sent his own son as a servant among the Boers to learn their ways, and when our own Paul Kruger was a young man there lived on his farm a Bantu boy, who afterwards became a king."

"And how did you discover Inyoni's identity?" Bob asked curiously.

"Oh, he volunteered the information. When we heard of your imprisonment, he immediately proposed that we should attempt a rescue. Snyman at first thought the plan mad and impossible, but Inyoni urged it so strongly that we at last agreed to try it. And then we wondered where we should hide you after getting you out of jail. The ranch, of course, was out of the question. And then Inyoni at last told us who he was and declared that Dabulamanzi, his father, would be delighted and honored to have you as a guest and to protect you with his life."

"And how long must I stay at that *kraal?*" Bob asked. The idea of a separation from Sannie, and of a lengthy sojourn among the blacks, did not appeal to him in the least.

"Until we have persuaded the authorities to grant you a full pardon," she replied promptly. "Or, failing that, until we can smuggle you out of the country—through Delagoa Bay, and— But I think we will be able to have the verdict squashed, all right. My father had powerful friends in Pretoria, and they will help us. Moreover, I know some of the bigwigs of the diamond syndicate, and I am sure that, when they learn the truth of the plot against you, they will see to it that justice is done. I shouldn't wonder if both Daniels and Silva landed in prison themselves, before we are done with them!"

Bob glanced at her admiringly. Day was breaking, and he could see the girl's face set purposefully and determinedly. Here was a true descendant of those splendid Boer heroines of a past generation who had trekked fearlessly into the wilderness, and who, in those sanguinary battles with the Zulus, had stood behind their men, loading and reloading the huge elephant guns that blazed death into the serried ranks of King Dingaan's *impies.*

He took her hand.

"And how about the risk to yourself—sweetheart?"

She smiled, leaned toward him and brushed his cheek with her lips.

"The risk I take?" she murmured. "What would life be without you? So you see, I am quite egotistic after all."

At dawn the veld became rose tinted, and the dew of night glistened on the prickly pears and the milk bushes. The *tock-tockie* of the South African beetle sounded in the tall grass, and overhead the *pauwe,* or veld buzzards, made their appearance.

Snyman pointed to the moisture on the hood.

"Good job we are driving a pair of *gesoute muilezels,*" he said. Then he elucidated, "I mean we are lucky to be driving a pair of salted mules, you know—mules that are immune to *tse-tse* bite. You see, the *tse-tse* fly operates during the day in the shade of trees, or at night when there is a heavy fall of dew. I would not care to drive unsalted mules or horses over this kind of veld!"

They "outspanned" for breakfast near a small creek at the foot of a *kopje.* Here Inyoni started a small fire on which Sannie made coffee, while Snyman lugged from the cart a bag containing Boer *beschuit,* bread and cold mutton. After the meal the men sat down to enjoy a pipe of Magaliesberg tobacco.

BUT THEIR rest was cut short by Inyoni, who rose to his feet suddenly. Something bothered the youngster, for he commenced to ascend the hillside and at last stopped halfway to scrutinize the plain. Evidently the Matabele did observe something, for now he beckoned to the white men to join him. At first Bob saw nothing but endless plain shimmering in the heat, but the Boer's eyes were better. He swore under his breath:

"*Verdomd!* They missed you sooner

than I expected. There they come. See that dust way off?"

Bob looked and marveled at the uncanny sense which had told the Matabele of the approach of danger. There, so far off that it seemed a mere breath of cloud against the horizon, was a speck of red dust. But already his companions were dashing down the slope, calling him to follow. Sannie, too, had noticed that something was amiss, for she had run to the mules and was backing them into the shafts. Then, before Bob even realized that the pursuit was on, the Matabele was cracking the long *sjambok* over the mules, and they were off, dashing through the narrow mountain pass at top speed.

Presently Snyman called back:

"Inyoni says our only chance is to reach a tributary of the Malopo River before they do. There is much water in the river now, and he knows of just one fording place. He says this drift is only known to the people of his tribe. We've got to go like hell! Let's hope those chaps behind us are not on horesback, for if they are they'll catch up with us before we reach the river! However, judging from their dust, I should say that they are also using Cape carts. The De Beer's police generally do, you know!"

Sannie looked back and then stood erect in the cart, steadying herself with one hand on the stanchions of the hood. Bending over, she lifted a section of the flooring and coolly produced from the space below two rifles, two pistols and a small box of ammunition. She noticed Bob's surprise.

"There," she said with a satisfied air. "We are ready for them—Bob! Now you take one of these rifles, and I'll take the other. We'll start shooting if they get too close."

The mules traveled through the pass at breakneck speed and soon the plain was no longer visible. But now the going became extremely hazardous, owing to the huge boulders strewn over the slope they were descending. Cape carts are built for speed, and their high slender wheels are easily smashed to splinters. But Snyman showed marvelous skill in handling the mules, and soon they were once again racing across the *tamboekie* grass of the valley below.

And now occurred one of those impromptu sporting events which are peculiar to the sub-continent of South Africa. All of a sudden—Bob could never explain whence they came—an enormous herd of hundreds of red-brown *impala* surrounded the cart. At first these graceful antelopes seemed startled, and inclined to shy from the hooded contraption in their midst. But presently, first one and then another, the *impala* entered into the spirit of the thing and commenced racing alonside the cart. There was no mistaking their antics—the speed of the mules had fired these wild things with the zest of competition and emulation.

"My father used to tell me that *impala, springbok* and *tsessebe* often race horses and mules," the girl called delightedly to Bob. "This is the first time I ever saw them do it, though. Oh, look at those two, over yonder, crossing and recrossing in front of the mules. They are showing us what real speed means."

And now, as if at a word of command, the entire herd developed a velocity far exceeding that of the mules. By hundreds they streamed past the cart, which was left lumbering behind in a cloud of dust.

Snyman looked around grinning all over.

"That was a terrible temptation," he confessed. "Fancy being in the midst of a herd like that, and not being able to shoot some venison for supper!"

He brought the cart to a standstill in the shade of a solitary *intombe* tree.

"Got to take an observation," he said, scrutinizing the route they had covered. "No, they have not come out of the pass yet," he announced. "Trek!" The whip cracked and they were off again.

Inyoni broke into voluble Matabele, which Sannie interpreted for Bob's benefit.

"He says we ought to get to the river in half an hour. Once across, we can easily reach his father Dabulamanzi's *kraal.*"

It was an unlucky speech, for she had hardly spoken when the left hand mule crashed down, nearly dragging its mate with it. The cart came to an abrupt stop.

Snyman jumped out and ran to the fallen animal.

"*Verdomd!*" he swore. "Just our luck. She has stumbled into an ant bear hole and has broken a leg. Well, there's nothing to it!"

He drew his revolver and, holding it against the wounded mule's head, pulled the trigger.

"Better this way than to leave the poor devil to the vultures," he muttered, cutting away the traces.

Soon the remaining mule was harnessed and they were off again, but this time at a reduced speed. The country now was interspersed with small clumps of trees and bush, and presently Inyoni, who was looking back over the hood, called out that he had caught sight of the pursuers. They were not very far away, he reported.

Snyman plied the *sjambok* mercilessly, urging the solitary mule to the limit of its endurance.

An exclamation from Sannie made Bob turn.

"I see them," she cried excitedly. "One Cape cart with a driver, and another man on horseback!"

Bob looked. There, scarcely half a mile away, came the pursuit. He shaded his eyes with his hand.

"I recognize the fellow on horseback," he cried. "It's that confounded Portogreek."

The girl blanched.

"Is it Silva?" she asked. Her voice held fear and loathing.

"Yes, it is," Bob replied, his eyes still on the pursuers. "Now he is speeding up and is coming hell for leather on his own hook. Here, maybe this will discourage him!"

He lifted his rifle and, standing erect in the jolting cart, took aim. Naturally, the shot went wild, but it brought Silva to his senses. It did more than that for, at the sound of the shot, the Portogreek drew up his horse so sharply that the animal swerved, catapulting its rider from the saddle. Apparently Silva was not hurt, for he scrambled to his feet and mounted again. However, he now realized his danger and stood waiting for his companion.

And now Inyoni shouted and pointed at a silver ribbon between two strips of dark verdure.

"*Malopo manzi,*" he cried. "*Malopo manzi!*"

At sight of the river Snyman urged the mule to a final effort. The animal bounded forward, dashing straight at the nearby fringe of trees and bush. At the same time a bullet whistled through the hood of the Cape cart. Bob whirled around and rapidly emptied his rifle, without scoring a hit. However, the pursuit slowed up perceptibly in the face of this steady stream of lead. Just then Snyman, who had not lost his head for an instant, drove the cart into the bush bordering the stream, where it was entirely withdrawn from view. Inyoni now jumped out and, taking the mule by the head, led it rapidly for some distance along the river bank. Then he turned abruptly and led the cart down a steep slope into the river.

"This place is drift," he announced, his ebony face glowing with satisfaction. "No other place cart can go, Inkoos!"

The Matabele was right, for the water hardly reached to the hubs. Halfway across, they hit a submerged rock, but Snyman, with a dexterous twist of the reins, prevented the vehicle from being overturned. Some difficulty was experienced in ascending the steep bank on the far side of the river, but at last they entered once more into the protecting jungle screen.

"It will take Silva and company at least a couple of hours to find our wagon spoor in that dense bush and to locate that ford," Snyman rejoiced, rubbing his hands. "Of course, Silva could swim his horse across, but I bet he funks it. That fat Portogreek didn't like our Yankee friend's markmanship one little bit!" He turned to Inyoni. "How far is it to Dabulamanzi's *kraal?*"

The Matabele replied that another hour should bring them to the *stad* of his people. A brief halt was called to rest the mule, and then they started off again, guided by Inyoni, who appeared to know this part of the bushveld thoroughly. Though usually silent and self-contained like all the Matabeles, and their kindred the Zulus, the young native now betrayed the feelings generally credited to the prodigal son returning to his home.

From time to time he broke out with reminiscent remarks. In that tree yonder he and two other Matabele boys had treed an African leopard. Beneath that rock, to the left, was the cave in which was buried Umtemba, his grandfather, who had commanded one of Lobengula's *impies*. And in that clump of bush a lion family had once made its home, and Inyoni could well remember how the men of the *kraal* had gone out, after the lions raided their *boma* and carried off two fat cows. The warriors, he related, had surrounded the bush at high noon when the lions were asleep, gorged with beef. And when, at last, the lions charged, they were impaled on the sharp points of the *assegais* of the warriors. Within the bush three young cubs were discovered and these had been killed also, although Inyoni and the other boys had begged the chief in command of the hunting party to give them the cubs to play with.

The Matabele had just related this incident when Snyman brought the cart to a sudden stop. There, silent and motionless, stood one of the Matabele warriors. The man seemed like a statue, leaning one hand on a huge shield, while the other held an *assegai*. His sudden and dramatic appearance startled the whites. But Inyoni, with a glad shout jumped from the cart and ran to the sentry, who lowered his *assegai*.

PRESENTLY Inyoni returned, beaming all over. The *kehla*, in whom he had recognized a boyhood friend, was on sentry duty, he reported. Word of the coming of the party to Dabulamanzi's *kraal* had already reached that chieftain through Matabele scouts who had watched them cross the river.

Presently the sentry was joined by a number of other warriors, commanded by an elderly *induna*. The latter advanced and saluted Inyoni with every mark of respect.

Sannie turned to Bob.

"What did I tell you? Inyoni must be quite a personage among them!"

The *induna* spoke briefly to Inyoni, and then gave an order to his followers, whereupon the entire party set off at a peculiar shuffling trot. Though they did not appear to exert themselves, they had no difficulty keeping ahead of the Cape cart and its solitary mule.

Presently the *kraal*, entirely surrounded by a stockade of *ysterhout*, came in view. It was quite a large town of huts built in the usual beehive style of the Zulus, and their kindred, the Matabeles and Swazies. That the tribe was a prosperous one, as prosperity is reckoned among the Bantu's, was evidenced by the lowing of many hundreds of longhorn Africander cattle in the roomy *boma*.

On entering the town an indescribable din assailed the newcomers. Young boys rapped bare knuckles on *kalabas* drums, innumerable Kaffir dogs, their hides spotted like leopards, barked and yelped, and women and children chanted their *sachabona*—greeting. To the right the men were lined up, helping to swell this noisy welcome to their chieftain's son by beating of *assegais* on oxhide shields.

A boy darted out and, taking hold of the mule, which had begun to shy at the noise, led it in triumphant procession to the center of the *kraal*, where the counselors of the tribe and the seasoned warriors stood about in a huge circle. And in the center of this circle, on a handsome chair of undoubted European manufacture, his huge body wrapped in the folds of a magnificent leopard skin *kaross*, the *bwana induna*, or great chief, himself was seated.

Dabulamanzi was a middle aged man, tall even for a Zulu or Matabele. He sat silent and motionless amid the terrific din and gave no sign that he was aware of the approach of strangers.

Snyman brought the cart to a stop at the edge of the circle, and Inyoni leaped from his place on the driver's box. But not, as yet, did he approach his father. Instead, as if to impress the great chief and his subjects with the importance of the new arrivals, he waited for his companions to descend from the cart. And only then did Inyoni turn to the chief, his right hand raised in greeting.

"*Bayete, Dabulamanzi!*" he exclaimed sonorously, bringing his father the royal salute. "*Bayete!*"

At this the whites looked surprised. However, they learned afterward that Dabulamanzi was indeed of the ancient royal blood of the Zulus, and that he was the direct descendant of a famous namesake who had given battle to Boer *voortrekkers* in the old days.

Dabulamanzi had remained seated, but his small black eyes roved appraisingly over the form of his son and heir, who had left the paternal *kraal* as a mere *umfaan* to take service with the whites and learn their ways. Evidently he was satisfied with what his scrutiny revealed, for he rose and, placing a huge hand on Inyoni's shoulder, spoke in a loud voice:

"Welcome, my son Inyoni, to the *kraal* of thy people. And greetings to those *umlungu* who come with thee. Thy people are glad to behold thee. Thou art grown a man indeed, worthy of the blood of Chaka and Dingaan and Dabulamanzi and Cetewayo that is in thy veins.

"But how is it thou returnest before the appointed day? When I sent thee, accompanied by Umtala, the counselor, to go among the white men, and learn their language and ways, it was decreed that thou must remain among the *umlungu* for eighteen moons. Twelve moons have passed, and yet thou art back once more in the *kraal* of thy fathers, and with thee are these white men, and that *inkoosiezana* whose hair is golden like the tassel in the mealies, and whose eyes seem like the sky at noon."

Inyoni had listened patiently to this parental harangue, and now answered:

"My father, these white people are my friends. This white man—" and he pointed at Bob— "saved me from injury. Of that I shall speak later. The *inkoosiezana* and the other *umlungu* also protected thy son from his enemies. And it is since they sheltered me, that my enemies became theirs. And now, my father, even while I speak these enemies who have hunted us draw close, and soon they will come and demand that thou must hand over to them one of these white men, in order that they may imprison him for a crime that was not his. What shall be thy answer, O Dabulamanzi?"

Inyoni had spoken slowly and with great dignity. No Matabele or Zulu yet lived who was not some sort of savage Demosthenes.

A murmur ran through the ranks of the warriors and rose to a shout.

"*Mayihlome! Mayihlome!* To arms! To arms!"

Dabulamanzi raised a restraining hand, then asked quietly—

"Who are thine enemies?"

In a few words Inyoni explained the situation. Dabulamanzi nodded.

"So those who are pursuing thee are police? Then we must be crafty as the jackal, even though here, at the *kraal*, our power exceeds theirs. For behind these policemen stands the strength of the white man's government. Well do I remember how Lobengula, the king of the Matabele, defied the whites, and what happened to him and his people!"

He turned to the whites.

"Welcome, friends! Thou art safe in the *kraal* of Dabulamanzi. The women shall escort thee to the guest huts!"

He beckoned to Inyoni.

"Come. I will call an *indaba* of the *indunas*, so that we may take counsel."

THE SUN had set before Inyoni rejoined his white companions. It had been a long *indaba*, he announced. Toward the end of the meeting, when Dabulmanzi and his *indunas* were yet deliberaing, scouts had brought word of the approach of Silva and Daniels. Subsequently, the two having been admitted to Dabulamanzi's presence, Daniels had adopted a threatening and insolent attitude. In consequence, he was almost *assegaied* by some of the younger *indunas*, Inyoni said. However, Dabulamanzi, ever calm and cunning, had restrained his impetuous followers.

Inyoni went on to tell how Dabulamanzi had frankly admitted the presence in his town of those whom the white police were hunting. But, he had pointed out, the hour was late, and darkness had fallen. He would call another counsel in the morning, at which both parties would be present. And with this reply Daniels and Silva had to be satisfied for the time being. A guest hut, located in another part of the *kraal*, had been placed at their disposal. And, to show that Dabulamanzi was taking no chances, several warriors had been told off to patrol the *kraal* during the night.

The next morning, following a breakfast of curdled milk, roast mutton and *mielie-pap*, the beating of *kalabas* drums announced the convening of the *indaba*. An elderly *induna*, whose freshly made gum headring glistened in the sun, acted as master of ceremony, and conducted the contending parties to their places. A little later Dabulamanzi appeared and seated himself in his chair of state.

The entire thing was marvelously stage managed, Bob thought, as he turned to meet the venomous glances Silva was bestowing on Sannie Van Der Byl and himself.

Dabulamanzi opened the proceedings with the simple announcement that he was ready to be enlightened. Impatiently, like a man in a hurry to get his business over and done with, Sergeant Daniels stated his case.

"Dabulamanzi, I told thee last night that these three white people yonder and that black servant of theirs are fugitives from justice. One of them was placed in prison in Kimberley and was rescued by the others. Consequently they have all broken the white man's law."

He had spoken hurriedly, evidently having rehearsed his speech beforehand. But now, looking up and meeting the white woman's contemptuous gaze, he lost control of his temper and exploded:

"And I warn thee, *induna*, do not trifle with us! Long is the arm, and many are the guns of the white man's government. That thou knowest. Therefore, command thy warriors not to interfere while we seize our prisoners. Too much time and too many words have been wasted already."

He ceased, and for a moment no one spoke. Then Dabulamanzi raised his head and asked—

"Thou chargest that white man yonder with buying a stone of great value; is it not so?"

Daniels nodded and replied that such was the case. Then he added insolently:

"Dabulamanzi, thou art not trying this case. It has already been tried by the white judge in Kimberley."

Dabulamanzi remained imperturbable. He asked:

"So thy people hold it a crime to buy the stones of the veld? Tell me, what kind of stone was it?"

Daniels was bewildered. What was this negro trying to put over? Restraining his anger, he answered sourly:

"It was a diamond—as thou knowest well enough, *induna*. Does that satisfy thy curiosity?"

Dabulamanzi made no answer, but turned and beckoned. At the gesture an ancient native, his emaciated body wrapped in a voluminous *kaross*, approached. A huge, curved oxhorn, suspended from his neck by a leather thong, proclaimed him the chief rainmaker and medicine man of the tribe.

"Hast thou brought what I sent thee to find?" Dabulamanzi asked quietly.

"I have found it," the medicine man answered in a clear voice.

"Then hand it to me."

From the folds of his *kaross* the rainmaker produced a small bag and handed it to the chief. Dabulamanzi took it, shook the contents in his hand and motioned Daniels to approach.

"The gems thou speakest of were like unto these?" he asked casually.

Opening his hand, he disclosed three large, scintillating pebbles.

Daniels went rigid with amazement, and Silva, who stood gazing over his shoulder, seemed turned to stone. Then they exclaimed, in a grotesque duet of astounded avarice—

"Diamonds!"

The American, though hardly able to believe his own eyes, laughed aloud at the sight of his two foes standing there with mouths agape, staring stupidly at Dabulamanzi and his diamonds.

At last Daniels found his voice—

"Where did you find the gems, *induna?*"

Dabulamanzi did not answer the question. A shrewd bargainer, he proceeded to push his advantage.

"Wouldst thou possess such gems?" he asked, almost caressingly. "And more like these? It is in my power to give thee great wealth, *umlungu!*"

Daniels glanced at Silva. Neither spoke, but their looks were eloquent. Gone from the policeman's mind was every thought of his prisoner and, as for Silva, he had lost all desire for vengeance. The sight of the wealth displayed in the chieftain's hand left no room in their minds for any passion but greed.

Daniels was the first to regain some measure of self-control. He tried to speak in an offhand manner:

"It is but natural, *induna,* that we wish to possess these stones, which are of some value. We are poor men. I see it is in thy mind to drive a bargain. Well—name the price!"

Dabulamanzi's expression never changed. These white hucksters would do anything he wished now. A vast contempt welled in the old chief's heart, but not a muscle twitched in his face.

"The price? We Matabele do not value such as these. We know where to find many more, and even larger stones than those thou seest. No, I can set no price on them. Yet, our laws of hospitality demand that I protect those who are my guests. Therefore will I make thee an offer: permit the two white men and the woman to dwell in peace in my *kraal* or to depart and go their own way. In that event these gems are thine, and I will have my men show thee the spot where we found them. Is it agreed?"

Daniels whispered to Silva, then turned eagerly to the American:

"All right, we'll let you go, on condition that you do not return to Kimberley until this matter has blown over. I will report that we failed to recapture you. As to Miss Van Der Byl—no one knows of her connection with the prison break except Silva and I."

Bob hesitated. He hated to bargain with these scoundrels. Moreover, he meant to wipe out the stigma of his I. D. B. sentence.

"You bet your life I will return to Kimberley," he answered hotly. "And when I do, I'll expose both of you. But I'm willing to wait till you and that other skunk have time to leave the country. Take it or leave it!"

Daniels shrugged his shoulders.

"We won't argue about that. If that spot Dabulamanzi speaks of turns out to be what I think it is, Silva and I will be rolling in money. Just give us time to clear out of the country, and then you may go to Kimberley and shout it from the house tops for all I care!"

He addressed Dabulamanzi:

"It is well, *induna.* We are agreed. Thy white friends may go where they please. Now show us where the diamonds are found. And hand over those gems."

Like a king bestowing alms on a beggar, Dabulamanzi gave him the diamonds. Then he announced:

"When the sun stands above yonder *kopje* at the noon hour, my men will conduct thee to the place where there are many of those stones for which white men sell their honor. The *indaba* is over."

With this parting shot the *induna* rose, his attitude showing plainer than words the contempt in which he held some white men.

AS THEY returned to the guest hut Sannie slipped her arm through Bob's.

"Don't take it so hard," she said consolingly. "Of course, I could see how you hated to bargain with that beast Daniels, but it was the only way out."

The American gritted his teeth.

"To think that those skunks are actually getting rich out of this blackmail and frameup business, and that I can not even take a good poke at them, drives me crazy," he exploded, clenching his fists. "Who knows how rich a diamond field old Dabulamanzi has stumbled on? Judging from those samples, it must be a regular Golconda."

Sannie did not reply, but her hand lightly touched his cheek and Bob, looking down in her eyes, came to the realization that all the world's treasure is not necessarily computed in carats.

They entered the hut together, and here a remarkable sight greeted them. On one side of the hut stood Snyman, watching the peculiar antics of Inyoni, who was seated on the floor of the hut, apparently in the grip of some severe paroxysm, which made his entire body shake and tremble.

"What is the matter? Is he ill?" the girl exclaimed anxiously.

Snyman snorted.

"Ill? I should say not. I think he has gone crazy. He's laughing his fool head off—that's what he has been doing for the past five minutes. I've been trying to find out what the joke is about, but he doesn't seem able to tell. Stop it, you idiot!"

The Matabele scrambled to his feet, tears running down his black cheeks.

"Ho-ho!" he laughed, bursting out anew. "My father Dabulamanzi is very cunning. Those two think they will be very rich men. They think to fool us. Well, perchance they become rich, but only after they are dead. And what good are diamond stones to dead men?"

Bob pricked up his ears and glanced sharply at the Matabele.

"What's the meaning of all this talk about dead men?" he asked. Inyoni's actions filled him with a vague premonition of trouble.

The Matabele nodded his head proudly.

"Dabulamanzi great *induna*," he exclaimed. "He promise many diamond stones, but do not speak of *mamba-gat*. Ho-ho! Good joke on Daniels and Silva!"

Bob felt entirely at sea. Evidently Dabulamanzi was putting up some sort of job on the two white men. But what was it? And what did *mamba-gat* mean? He turned to Snyman for an explanation.

The Boer's eyes had narrowed. Evidently he was at last catching the drift of Inyoni's remarks, for he launched into a horrified cross examination of the Matabele. And now Sannie also seemed to understand, for she gasped and turned white.

Snyman shuddered.

"*Allemachtig!* This is terrible. We must stop it!"

"What is terrible, and what have we got to put a stop to?" the American asked impatiently. "Somebody please tell me what it's all about. It's all Greek to me."

The Boer pulled himself together.

"I'll tell you. Inyoni here thinks it a great joke, and so do his father Dabulamanzi and the entire tribe, but the thing is too awful for words. Yes, they've put up a job on Silva and Daniels all right. It is too ghastly."

Bob could contain himself no longer.

"Out with it, man!" he snapped. "This beating about the bush gets my goat. What is it?"

Snyman explained slowly.

"You heard Inyoni speak of the *mamba-gat?* That means a *mamba* hole. The *mamba*, you know, is the African variety of cobra, and is every bit as deadly as the cobra of India. Its poison is so virulent that death is almost instantaneous.

"The black *mamba* is a fighting fool and goes out of its way to attack animals as well as human beings. I've seen them six foot long and more, and as thick as your arm.

"Now it appears that, not far from this *kraal*, there is a dip, or hole in the ground which is simply lousy with these hooded serpents. The spot, from Inyoni's description, must be of volcanic origin. It is located between two *kopjes* and is just one immense crater of jagged rock. The *mambas* have their holes in among the rocks and during the day they come out. And it is in this horrible crater that the diamonds are found, according to Inyoni. Now it seems that Dabulamanzi has conceived the devilish plan of luring Daniels and Silva into the pit at high noon, when the *mambas* are out in force, taking the air. The chances of their coming out alive are just about one in a thousand. The Kaffirs know—for it has been a tribal custom of theirs to force adulterous wives into the crater. The entire tribe lines the rim of the pit on such occasions to see what happens.

"If the lady survives and manages to crawl out of the hole unharmed, it is proof that she has been much maligned and that she is really a virtuous wife. In that case she is made much of and is escorted ceremoniously back to the *kayah* of her husband. However, only a few of these poor Magdalens have ever come out of the place alive, Inyoni says, and one of them died when she got to the top—probably of heart failure. So now you see what is in store for Daniels and his partner."

For a second Bob stood nailed to the ground with horror. Then he burst out:

"My God, we can not let them do that. It's unspeakable. Those fellows may be scoundrels and criminals, but they are human beings. We've got to stop it."

The girl clutched his arm.

"Yes, yes, we must save them. Hurry—hurry!"

She turned furiously on Inyoni. It had gradually dawned on the Matabele that these white friends of his did not approve of the horrible punishment about to be visited on their enemies. Strangely enough, the thing did not appear funny to them at all and, realizing this, Inyoni now looked serious and was laughing no longer. Strange indeed were the ways of the *umlungu!* But he shrugged his shoulders, as Snyman bellowed that this thing was to go no further and that the white men must not be allowed to approach the hellish, snake infested diamond cache.

"It is too late now, *inkoos*," the young Matabele answered penitently. "The white men and the medicine man, together with several warriors, have already gone. They were eager to find more of the diamond stones, and must have almost reached the place by now. They will have descended into the pit before we can stop them."

EVEN before he had uttered the words, Bob and Snyman, followed by Sannie, dashed from the hut and ran toward the Cape cart and mule. Working feverishly, Snyman inspanned the cart in record time. The next minute they were off. Inyoni, completely mystified, jumped into the cart as it sped by him. These white people were bent on saving the very men who had mercilessly hunted them; but they had befriended Inyoni, and Inyoni would follow where they led.

Dashing across the veld, they covered the distance at breakneck speed. Up the slope of one *kopje* they went, topped the summit, then down the other side, regardless of obstacles. Inyoni pointed his hand. There, many feet below the level of the land, hollowed out of the stony soil, yawned a deep, precipitous bowl or pit, like a sunken crater. Several *kaross* clad men lined the rim of this gigantic hole, into which the burning rays of the noonday sun slanted perpendicularly.

"Jehoshaphat, what a big hole!" Snyman exclaimed. "It looks like the entrance to hell!"

"Yes, and the snakes are the devils that live in it," the American commented. "Those fellows peering into the hole, with their backs to us, are all natives. Daniels and Silva must have gone down already. I'm afraid we are too late."

At the edge of the pit Snyman brought the cart to a sudden jolting stop. The next instant they were out of the cart, looking down into the awful depth below.

Its walls were precipitous and consisted of a mass of rock, with only here and there a sparse tuft of vegetation. To one side—that on which the onlookers were ranged—the face of the rock presented a slight slope, and halfway down this slope two small figures, one in khaki and the other in soiled white drill, scrambled laboriously from rock to rock. Evidently they had not yet come across the dreaded guardians of the place, nor did they suspect what was in store for them.

Snyman put his hands to his mouth and halloed vigorously, while the American gave a shrill whistle. The men below stopped and looked up.

"Come back, you fools, the place is full of snakes!" the Boer shouted at the top of his voice.

The words echoed ominously along the rock walls, and for a moment it seemed as if Daniels had understood. But then he waved his hand derisively, while Silva shook his fist at them. Then they turned their backs and began scrambling down once more.

Snyman shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, that's that! Their blood is on their own heads. Those idiots think we are trying to scare them away from their precious diamonds. We've done all we could." He pulled out his pipe and calmly filled it with Magaliesberg, as if having no further interest in the matter.

A cry from Sannie made him whirl around. Without saying a word, the American had swung himself over the edge of the pit and was rapidly sliding down the face of the rock.

"Hi, come back, you fool Yankee!" the startled Boer yelled. "Are you tired of life?"

Bob made no reply, but kept on going as fast as he could, steadying himself with his left hand and holding a revolver in his right. His intention was clear—he meant to catch up with Daniels and Silva and warn them of the trap into which they had fallen.

The Boer swore furiously and fluently in every language of the sub-continent. Then, throwing his pipe to one side and his hat to another, he whipped out his pistol and went over the side himself, yelling to Sannie:

"I'm going to bring that idiot back before the *mambas* get him. So long!"

The girl threw herself at full length by the side of the precipice and gazed down despairingly. The American was yet some distance behind Daniels and Silva when horrible screams arose from the bottom. The cries echoed from one wall of the precipice to the other and seemed to emanate from Silva, who had been in the lead. And then the girl saw how Silva was trying to shield himself by throwing his helmet at something below his feet. Then he turned as if to retrace his steps, but the next instant was seen to slip and fall. Again the sound of his screaming filled the pit with horrible clamor, and now the girl could hear his cries.

"Help, Daniels, help—they are all over me. My God, I am bitten—"

Daniels, who was a few yards behind, had paused irresolutely when Silva first called out. But now he pulled out his gun and advanced toward the stricken man. Crook though he was, the policeman did not play the coward. His right arm flew up, and three shots sounded in rapid succession. Then, suddenly launching out with his foot, he kicked at something black and sinuous that darted at him from the left. And now Daniels also turned and began climbing back hurriedly. Silva was no longer visible and his cries had subsided.

Bob met the police officer after the latter had gone a little way. Daniels was pale as death, and the perspiration ran down his face.

"Silva is dead," he called. "He is lying in that hole yonder, with snakes crawling all over him. And I have been bitten myself."

He pointed to his right knee.

"My God, man, can't you do something?" he begged, his voice rising to a scream. His eyes protruded and, in the fear of death, he was fast losing the last shreds of courage.

"Sit down!" Bob ordered. "Got a knife?"

The man was about to faint, but he fumbled in his pocket and drew out a knife. Bob took it and opened the blade. Working quickly, he slit open the khaki riding trousers and examined the wound. Two punctures, rapidly blackening and extending, were visible.

"I'm going to open it up!" the American said.

Daniels set his teeth as the point of the knife dug into the wound. Suddenly his eyes opened wide.

"The *mambas*, the *mambas!*" he cried. "They are crawling up over the side of the hole!"

Bob turned and looked. There, not ten yards away, two black snakes, each at least six feet long, were crawling up the rock, black hoods extended, and bead-like eyes bright with deadly menace. The African cobra in fighting trim! The American grasped his pistol but, as he took aim, two shots cracked beside him, and the swaying head of one of the snakes fell back on its coils, a writhing horror. Snyman had arrived in the nick of time. Another shot, and the second snake slid back into the crevice, threshing about in its death throes. Coolly, and without another look at the reptiles, the American completed his job of surgery and, taking off his necktie, knotted it tightly around Daniels' knee, just above the wound, stopping the flow of blood to the heart and making it gush freely from the afflicted part.

"Back you go," Bob said crisply. "Can you walk?"

Though pale with the loss of blood and pain, Daniels said he could climb back to the edge of the pit unaided.

"Bully for you," the American said encouragingly. Curiously enough, he felt no rancor against Daniels, such powerful mediators are danger and death. "Hurry up," he urged. "You'll need whatever help the Kaffir medicine man up there can give you. In the meantime Snyman and I must take care of that—" He pointed to the crevice from which the upper part of Silva's dead body projected grotesquely.

Daniels shivered.

"For God's sake, look out," he cried. "That hole is alive with snakes. Silva fell right in the midst of them, and he must have been bitten in a hundred places!"

Rescuing the body from its awful place of doom was dangerous work. Bob risked one look into the hole, and what he saw there haunted his dreams for many a night. But at last they managed to pull the body out, with the help of Inyoni, who had also joined them. None of the other tribesmen had stirred a finger, which was not surprising, for theaverage Bantu lives in deadly fear of all snakes, and of *mambas* in particular.

Near the edge of the crater they caught up with Daniels, who was moving slowly, and upon whom the poison was beginning to take effect. A few more yards and then, at last, they were clear of the hellish pit. Sobbing as if her heart were breaking, the girl threw her arms around Bob. Dry eyed, horror stricken, she had gazed into the depths below, but now that the suspense was over, she came nearer to hysteria than she had ever been in her life. She could hardly believe that Bob had escaped without harm, and all his eloquence was required to convince her of the fact.

Some one had thrown a *kaross* over Silva's body, which was as well, for it was not a pleasant sight. In the meantime the medicine man of the tribe was engaged in rubbing some of his medicinal herbs into Daniels' wound. The policeman had collapsed completely and was lying with his eyes closed, a deathly pallor on his face.

"Is he dying?" Bob asked.

The Boer shook his head.

"No, I think he will recover. But he is having a narrow squeak."

Snyman turned to Inyoni and gave him some instructions, then announced briskly:

"Silva will be buried right here. One place is as good as another. Now let's put Daniels in the cart, and away we go!"

Daniels was delirious when they reached the *kraal*. He seemed in a bad way indeed. Throughout the night it was touch-and-go, but at last his fever abated and he fell asleep. He awoke late the next morning, still sick and weak, but apparently out of danger.

The next morning the police officer had recovered so far as to be able to express his gratitude to Bob and Snyman for rescuing him from the *mamba* hole. He offered to do anything in his power to clear the American of the I. D. B. charge, even if it meant going to jail himself. He spoke in a weak voice, shaken with emotion.

There was no mistaking his sincerity. Bob Breeze, who could never hold a grudge for any length of time, held out his hand.

"Shake," he said simply. "There's no ill feeling, and I don't want you to go to jail in my place. I'll stand by the bargain the two of us made with old man Dabulamanzi. All we ask you to do is to sign a statement to the effect that you knew right along that I was not a professional dealer in illicit diamonds, and telling just how I was trapped into buying that one stone. The document will be witnessed by my companions, and I'll use it to clear my name, but will not do so until you've had time to leave the country."

To this Daniels readily and gratefully agreed.

They remained for two more days at the *kraal*, then bade farewell to Dabulamanzi and his son. Dabulamanzi said he had decided that Inyoni would henceforth remain with the tribe, "for he considered that his son's education among the white men had been completed in every respect." With this delicate touch of irony the wily old *induna* took his leave of them.

Sergeant Daniels accompanied his former foes to the nearest station on the Johannesburg railroad line. As they parted he humbly asked the girl to accept one of the two splendid diamonds he had received from Dabulamanzi.

"A wedding present—something to make you think not too harshly of me," he said mournfully.

They never saw him again.

Rietfontein today is the finest *plaats* between the Malopo and the Oranje Rivers, thanks to the progressive methods introduced by the man from California who married the daughter of old Jacobus Van Der Byl, the Boers will tell you.

The SONG of the MULE

By

H. H. KNIBBS

SING, if ye will, of the thoroughbred and the fine old Morgan breed,
The Arab sire with his noble head and his gift of grace and speed,
Of cavalry mount and range cayuse—yes, follow the old-time rule;
But here is the song of a stouter muse—the song of the homely mule!

Unsung pedestrian Pegasus, child of the true romance,
A worthy theme for the best of us in the study of assonance;
A royal gift when the Spanish Don held half of the world in fee;
Banners fade—yet the mule goes on, in spite of his pedigree.

Sorrel or chestnut, brown or black, flea-bitten gray or roan,
Zebra stripe on his legs or back, a lineage all his own;
His hide is tough, his voice is loud, his frame is uncouth and strong;
He shows no pride as a horse is proud—but he knows where his feet belong!

He came with the outpost ambulance, he followed the new frontier,
He was more than a long-eared circumstance as a railroad pioneer;
He blazed the way for the iron trail and carried the scant supplies,
Or toiled at grading and tucked his tail and hee-hawed to the skies.

When scouts ride into the borderland, the mule is first to go,
 The chosen mount of a wary band who trail an elusive foe;
Hunger and heat and thirst pursue, cinches and belts grow slack;
 Guidon and horse may make it through—but ever the mule comes back.

Yea, smile at his awkward fashioning, mock at his weird refrain,
 But watch him work in a freighter's string, and watch him jump the chain
On a mountain grade, with a load of ore, when the brakeshoes grind and jerk,
 And a half-mile drop to The Golden Shore if he doesn't observe his work:

In outland venture, in mine or mart, he's the handiest tool alive.
 Show him his work and he takes his part and strives as the builders strive;
Rusty, dusty, rugged and slow, he ambles from sun to sun,
 Trails a trace to the barn—and lo! the thing that was dreamed is done.

Hut! you Jerry! Hyeh! Jake! The dump-carts jolt and groan,
 The slithering fresno rounds the stake, the crushers vomit stone;
Dust, machinery, mules, and men, whistle and tramway gong,
 Over the world and back again—this is your glory-song!

THE CHOTA SAHIB

A Tale of White Men in India

By L. G. BLOCHMAN

THE up *Punjab Mail* rushed grunting into the sleepy station of Kilipur Junction and paused a moment, panting, before plunging on into the Ganges valley, on across the plains of the United Provinces to Delhi and Lahore. It was an ungodly hour, for the men who send the *Punjab Mail* away from Calcutta care little what time it passes such unimportant points as Kilipur. The station platform was dark and deserted except for a few halfcaste trainmen. They scarcely glanced at the slim, boyish European who got off, followed by a portly Bengali servant. The portly servant shouted in annoyed tones for coolies, but the echoes mockingly told him that at 4:00 A.M. he must be strong enough to carry a suitcase and a bedding roll himself.

"While you are refreshing yourself I will go at once to reconnoiter for further transportation," said the portly Bengali, whose *babu* English indicated that he considered himself more than a mere bearer.

"All right, Bannerjee," said the European. "And ask discreetly if any one around here knows what has become of Mr. Whyler."

"I am always discreet, sir," replied Bannerjee.

The slim European entered the refreshment room. The place was filled with shadows and the warm odor of kerosene. The *punkahs* hung unmoving above the tables.

Two steps beyond the threshold he stumbled against a limp figure stretched out on the floor. The impact immediately converted the prone figure into an erect, bow legged, dark faced waiter, winking the sleep from his eyes.

"Tea, *khansama.*"

The sleepy *khansama* nodded. His bare feet shuffled across the cement floor as he turned up the lamp in the wall bracket and disappeared.

In the increased glow of the lamplight, the slim European saw for the first time that he was not alone in the refreshment room.

In a far corner of the room a man raised his head from bony elbows and grinned over the top of his white topee which lay on the table before him. Although he wore an Occidental suit of white drill, he was not a Caucasian. His narrow, angular face was brown and shiny.

"How are you, Mr. Spence?" he inquired.

The youth replied at first only with a puzzled stare. Then his features relaxed slightly in recognition, but not entirely in relief.

"Oh, hello, Daula," he returned the greeting.

Roy Spence knew C. R. Daula from Calcutta—a smart and pretty much Anglicized Mohammedan. He had been to British schools and frequented the European colony as much as British caste allowed one of his blood. People had found him useful as a liaison between European and Indian enterprise. For awhile he had been tipster for an English newspaper. Then he had dabbled in politics—until Asia Coal, Ltd, discovered that he had graduated from Calcutta University in geology.

"Going up to Lalkand, Mr. Spence?" smiled Daula.

"What makes you ask that?"

"I have heard that the Bengal Collieries are opening a new coal seam at Lalkand," said Daula.

Then it was true that the Lalkand seam was no longer a secret, Spence reflected. His company, Bengal Collieries, had sent Sam Whyler to Lalkand a few weeks before to get the concession for working the new coal seam. Now Spence was going up on the same mission because of a report that a rival concern, Asia Coal, was also after the Lalkand concession. As far as Spence knew, Daula was still with Asia Coal.

"Maybe you're going to Lalkand yourself?" suggested Spence.

"No, indeed, Mr. Spence. I'm waiting for my train for Calcutta."

"You're just coming from Lalkand, then?"

"No, indeed, Mr. Spence. I came here in the night by that miserable little Bihar railway that runs to this junction. Asia Coal has a mine on that line, you know."

Yes, Spence knew about Asia Coal's mine in Bihar. It was the first concession that Asia Coal had wrested from Bengal Collieries. There had been two more since then, and a good deal of talk about tactics employed. He wondered if Daula's presence here did not mean that Lalkand was to be the next scene of struggle between the two companies.

Spence sipped the deep red tea that the *khansama* had just brought. He did not resemble the usual European that one might see drinking tea in a *mofussil* refreshment room at four in the morning. There was a healthy glow to his cheeks, and an alert, candid light in his blue eyes. Something about him, some vague freshness, gave the impression that he had not been long in India. He was evidently what Calcutta people would call a *chota sahib*—small master—a junior in some European enterprise, newly arrived from temperate climes.

"Not staying on in Kilipur Junction, I hope, Mr. Spence?" said Daula with studied politeness.

"Leaving as soon as my bearer finds a *tonga* of some kind."

"Lucky fellow. You will be traveling first. The down express doesn't come through for at least an hour. It will already be beastly hot by then."

"I didn't know the down express stopped here," said Spence.

"Oh, yes," said Daula. "It stops on signal. You'll be seeing Mr. Whyler this afternoon, then?"

"I thought you said you hadn't been to Lalkand," said Spence.

"I haven't."

"Then how did you know Sam Whyler was in this part of the country?"

"Bazaar talk," Daula replied, smiling. "You know how news travels in India. Like wireless. Mysterious and rapid."

"Did you hear if Sam Whyler is sick?" asked Spence.

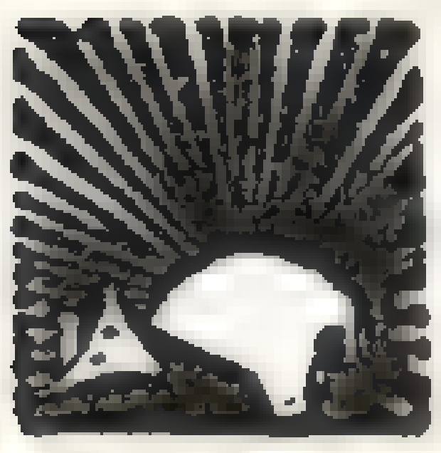
Daula smiled again.

"Did he—write that he was ill?"

"No," said Spence, "but he's pretty far away from everything up where he is, and the climate can't be any too healthy."

"Don't worry about Mr. Whyler." Daula was still smiling—rather queerly, Spence thought. "He's been in India long enough to take care of himself."

But Roy Spence was indeed worrying about Whyler, when he took leave of Daula half an hour later to climb into an aged, infirm looking, two wheeled *tonga* with his baggage and the plump Bannerjee. He was, in fact, looking for Whyler.



THE *TONGA* rattled past the brick railway bungalows and the scattered mud huts of Kilipur, striking out across the hopelessly flat paddy fields toward a line of hills, faintly blue on the horizon. The sun had emerged from the sudden dawn to make shadows and warm, yellow highlights on the monotonous green of the rice. The tepid air grew uncomfortable and Spence opened the collar of his khaki shirt.

What had happened, Spence was asking himself as the hot sun rose higher, that Whyler had remained so long without giving signs of life? True, Lalkand was far from a telegraph, but mail *tongas* certainly made the trip to the railway oftener than once in two weeks. Yet it was a fortnight since the Calcutta office of Bengal Collieries had heard from Whyler. In view of the importance of the mission and the rumor that Asia Coal was also after the Lalkand seam, two weeks' silence seemed to spell the end of Whyler's connection with Bengal Collieries—had not Roy Spence intervened. And while Roy Spence was only a *chota sahib*, he was also the nephew of Clifford Spence, chairman of the board; so his intervention was grudgingly accepted.

Young Spence undertook to find out what was the matter with Whyler and to cinch the concession for coal mines at Lalkand. He was sure that something had happened beyond Whyler's control, for Whyler was the lad's hero. He had once saved Roy Spence's life.

The week he had arrived in India, Spence was crossing from Calcutta to Howrah in a heavy rain. The small ferry had collided with a big country barge, and Spence was thrown into the Hooghly. Unable to swim, he was being carried away in the swirling brown river, swollen by the monsoons, when Sam Whyler had jumped in after him and pulled him to a dinghy.

Whyler had been up-country most of the time since the accident, but Spence had preserved a grateful memory of him. To Spence, he typified the white-man-in-the-East that the story books tell about—virile, courageous, active. He was proud to be sent on a mission with Whyler and glad of the chance to save him from unmerited dismissal. He wondered whether Daula's knowledge of Whyler's supposedly secret mission could have anything to do with his silence. Perhaps . . .

A train whistled in the distance. Spence turned to see the dull red cars streaking through the green rice fields—the down Calcutta express. He noted with some surprise that the express shrieked through Kilipur Junction without stopping. Daula must have been wrong about the express making Kilipur on signal. He would probably get the Moghulserai local a little later.

The *tonga* jogged along through the steamy, suffocating morning. The withering sun mounted higher. Perspiration collected on Spence's knees, protruding from his khaki shorts. He opened another button at the neck of his shirt, and envied the half naked brown farmers who were plowing near the sketchy road with big gray buffaloes. For long stretches the rice fields would disappear, and the road, a mere cart track, would climb. The country was not mountainous, but it was rolling, covered with cactus, an occasional clump of stiff *talipot* palms, and once in a while a village of thatched huts with a community reservoir of green water and the white peak of a Hindu temple.

At noon the *tonga* stopped in the hot shade of a mango tree while Bannerjee produced a tiffin basket full of food, and the *tonga-walla* fed the horse. Then came more dusty miles, jolting, monotonous miles.

The sun was well on its downward course before the *tonga* came within sight of Lalkand. The *tonga* rattled through a clump of palms on a little rise, and Spence saw the town baking in a sort of hollow at the foot of a red sandstone bluff. To him it appeared a mosaic of thatch and tile roofs, with an occasional mud wall or a flash of whitewash. Here and there the scarlet tuft of a gold *mohur* tree flamed above the low, drab houses. On one side of the town was the subdued gray pyramid of a Hindu shrine. On the other, dominating the scene from the talus leading up to the red cliff, were the dazzling white minarets of a Mohammedan mosque. The importance of the mosque seemed to Spence to be out of proportion to the size of the town.

On another little eminence across the town, the *tonga-walla* said, was the *dak* bungalow—one of those rest houses the British try to keep from rotting between the visits of district officials or rare up-country travelers. Whyler would be there, if he were in Lalkand. In any case, Spence would make it his headquarters.

The *dak* bungalow was a converted Bengali structure with mud walls that bulged and bamboo cornices that sagged under the weight of a roof of dull red tile. There was a veranda of sorts across the front. An Ooria coolie was listlessly dousing water on a big mat of coconut fiber hung over the door to filter the heat from ingoing air.

Spence entered. Inside the first room, it was twilight. Two more rooms opened on the other side. Beside one of the inner doors, a half naked lad was squatting on the bricked floor, dozing as he pulled automatically on a *punkah* rope that went through a hole in the wall far above his head. That must be Whyler's room—if Whyler were there. Spence had purposely avoided asking the coolie at the door about Whyler. He was afraid of hearing something disagreeable. The sight of the *punkah-walla* in action reassured him somewhat. Some one was in that other room. It was probably Whyler. Yet . . .

Spence hesitated on the threshold.

With a determined motion, he wiped the perspiration from his forehead as though he were trying to wipe away a premonition, a foolish feeling of uneasiness. Suddenly he went in.

STRETCHED out on an iron cot, its startling nudity softened by the haze of a mosquito net, lay the plump form of Sam Whyler, a towel tied about his middle. The immobility of the man, lying there with his eyes closed and mouth open, caused Spence to take a quick step forward. But the sudden guttural sound that issued from between the parted lips removed any doubt that life existed in the naked body. Whyler was alive—and asleep.

Spence had never realized before that Whyler was quite that fat. His was not that extreme rotundity which gives an impression of frank good nature, but rather a careless corpulence, a flabbiness that almost hid the eyes slanting upward toward each other, and that left deep furrows on either side of a small red mustache.

Spence was about to wake him when he was struck by the ruddiness of the sleeping man's face in comparison with the rest of his body. Perhaps it was the flush of fever—as he had imagined for the past week. Then, on a table on the other side of the bed, he saw a glass and several half empty bottles.

"Mr. Whyler!" said Spence loudly.

The man on the cot opened his eyes.

"How are you, Mr. Whyler?"

"I'm all right," said Whyler in a voice

that argued. "I never drink before sundown. Nobody in India drinks before sundown."

Then he turned his head and saw Spence. With an obvious effort he raised himself slowly on one elbow.

"Hello there, young man," he said. "What are you doing here in Lalkand?"

"I've come to see about you, Mr. Whyler. They didn't know what had become of you. They wanted to give you the sack, down in Calcutta, but I got them to let me come up and straighten things out."

"I'm all right," repeated Whyler.

"Why didn't you give news of yourself?"

"There wasn't any news," said Whyler.

"What about the coal seam?"

"Oh, it's here, all right. But they knew all about that down in Calcutta."

"Have you got the concession?"

"No," said Whyler. "Not yet."

"But you've been here for two weeks."

"*Chota sahib*, when you've been in India as long as I have, you'll know that two weeks is nothing. Hurry is a word from an old English root that has no place out East."

"But Bengal Collieries are depending on you to get the concession. Haven't you heard that Asia Coal wants it, too?"

"No," said Whyler. He paused for a moment. Then he added, "They won't get it either—yet. Nobody can get it right now."

"What's the matter?"

"It's a long story. What time is it?"

"Nearly five."

"Time for the short ones," said Whyler. "Sun's nearly down. We'll have a drink on the veranda and I'll tell you all about it. But maybe you want your bath first?"

"No. I'd rather hear what's happened."

Whyler put on dressing gown and slippers and shuffled out to the veranda with Spence. The bearer knew his routine, for small glasses, gin and bitters stood on the table.

Spence sat down. Before him lay Lalkand, a tessellated carpet of long shadows that leaned wearily against sun baked houses. A faint, lazy hum of human existence rose above the roofs with the heat waves, conveying to Spence a feeling of lassitude. He watched a dirty, humpbacked bull move slowly across the scene. Then his eyes fell on the austere outline of the mosque, a few hundred yards in front of the bungalow and slightly below it. The rigid shafts of the two minarets reaching up from the cooked-out level of the town seemed the only symbols of energy in sight. He could see into the courtyard of the mosque, alive with a restless, bright colored crowd. A figure appeared on the circular balcony near the top of one of the minarets, and uttered a long falsetto cry.

"There," said Whyler, motioning toward the mosque with his full glass. "There's what's happened."

Spence heard the falsetto call repeated—the *muezzin* summoning the faithful to evening prayer. The crowd in the mosque compound stopped milling and went down on their knees. A Moslem driving a pair of nodding bullocks past the *dak* bungalow seized their tails and pulled them up short. He sprang from the cart, faced toward the west, knelt, and touched his forehead to the ground.

"What's this got to do with coal?" asked Spence.

"Everything," Whyler replied. "This place belongs to the Moslems. Most of the land around here belongs to the Masjid. The piece that Bengal Collieries would want is holy ground—holy as hell. There's dozens of tombs of nigger saints on the property. *Dargahs*, they call them. They'd be awfully provoked if we disturbed 'em. Riots and all that sort of thing. Just as bad as if some one turned a pig loose in the mosque. Sacrilege."

"Can't we negotiate with the high priest or whoever's in charge of the mosque?"

"Well, yes, maybe," said Whyler, turning his empty glass so that a drop of bitters would trace filmy lines about the inside. "But not right now. They've been having their Moharram holidays the last week and can't be disturbed. It's some sort of mourning business—lasts ten days. When it's over, we'll see. No use to hurry in this country, *chota sahib*. Everything waits . . ."

ROY SPENCE, however, decided not to wait. He knew what the men in Calcutta thought of the delay, and he was determined to protect Whyler from their wrath. Whyler had saved his life once. The least he could do now was to help him overcome his own incompetence—a side of the hero that Spence had never seen before. Whyler's unbelievable insouciance, his apparent neglect of an important mission in the face of probable opposition from Asia Coal, was leading him to disaster. Spence had of course heard that the East affected men that way—took the starch out of them. But Whyler was the last man he would have expected to go to pieces all of a sudden. True, he did not know him very well, but he could not have been with Bengal Collieries for so long had he shown this attitude before. Probably up-country loneliness and the consoling bottle . . .

Spence was up early next day. When the *muezzin* appeared in the minaret to drone his call to morning prayer, Spence was walking briskly through the village. He wanted to get some exercise before the full heat of the day made it killing. He also made inquiries about the Moslem authorities.

When he returned to the *dak* bungalow, Whyler was still asleep. So he went to the mosque alone.

The holiday crowds and the apparent bustle of festival preparation in the vicinity of the mosque might have kept away any one less earnest or more sophisticated than Roy Spence. Whyler's tale about the difficulty of approach on holidays seemed reasonable enough. Yet Spence's very guilelessness sent him up to the Mohammedan sanctum without a qualm.

He took off his shoes at the front of the weathered gray stairs, for he knew that the mark of Moslem respect was to keep the head covered and the feet uncovered. When a surly Moslem barred the entrance he produced a four-anna coin and asked to see the *hajji*.

The Moslem thereupon became a whit less surly and led Spence through a colonnade of pointed arches.

At the farther side of the mosque, where the *mihrabs* face toward Mecca and the minarets rise to flank a pointed cupola, Spence found the man he sought—the *hajji*.

The *hajji* sat on a rug in the center of a bare room. He was a keen eyed old man, a thin white beard covering his dark face. A yellow-green turban wound about a flat topped, gold embroidered headdress indicated that he had made the Great Pilgrimage to the shrine that all Islam should visit once in a lifetime.

As he listened to Spence, the *hajji* turned his head away with apparent indifference. But Spence could see that his eyes burned with a peculiar light. When he had finished, the old man started to talk slowly.

Yes, the *hajji* knew that coal was being sought at Lalkand. The *sahibs* were eternally laying bare the insides of Mother India—but then *sahibs* were notoriously indelicate. Did the young *sahib* know that this land belonged to the Jumma mosque? That it contained the tomb of many a *pir*? What did the young *sahib* propose to do about this?

Spence pursed his lips. In Calcutta they had told him not to hesitate in the matter of expense. It was understood that there would be palms to grease. The demand for *baksheesh* is ever present in India. He could promise a lakh of rupees if necessary; the Bengal Collieries would stand for it, if only the concession were cinched. But Spence could not bring himself to offer a bribe to the *hajji*. There was an apparent sincerity in the manner of this venerable Moslem who had gone all the way to Mecca and back for the sake of his faith. The youth took a new tack.

"My company will respect the tombs as far as possible," said Spence. "My company reveres the *pirs* as much as you do.

Should it be necessary to disturb them, it would be only with your consent. In compensation, my company will build a new Jumma mosque and endow the old one."

The *hajji* looked at Spence closely for a moment. He talked figures for another moment. Then he said:

"My people are antagonistic to Europeans. When I tell them we can no more halt what the European calls progress than the Prophet could make the mountain come to him, they say, 'Very well. If it is Allah's will that the *sahibs* despoil our land, it must also be his will that we die defending it.'

"However, I tell them there are two kinds of *sahibs;* those who mistrust us and therefore deserve to be cheated; those who look for the good in men and therefore deserve to find it. You have honest eyes. Your face speaks the same message as your lips. Therefore honesty must cross your path. Have you authority from your *burra sahib* to make this offer?"

"Yes," said Spence. "I'll put it in writing."

"Your word is enough," said the *hajji.* "But from me your *burra sahib* will ask papers. He shall have them."

He called a *munshi* and dictated a page of flowing Urdu script.

WHEN Roy Spence returned to the *dak* bungalow for tiffin, Whyler was already three stiff drinks on his way. He was sober enough, however, to remark the happy expression on Spence's perspiring face.

"You look pleased with yourself, *chota sahib,*" said Whyler as the two sat down with a bowl of *dhal* curry between them. "Did you have a good morning?"

"Couldn't be better." Spence beamed. "Bengal Collieries can start work on the new seam right away. The *hajji* gave us a concession to the Moslem lands."

Whyler heaped rice on his plate. He did not look up as he said listlessly:

"Congratulations. You're probably the only living man who has transacted business with Mohammedans during the Moharram festival. On the tenth and biggest day of the festival, in fact. But have you anything in writing?"

Spence said he had the *hajji's* agreement in Urdu, ready for signature in Calcutta, and that the *hajji* would sign the English text which would undoubtedly come back.

"Well," said Whyler, in the same thick, toneless voice, "you'll get no end of reward for this. They'll make you something important in the company. Your uncle will see to that."

For a moment Spence pictured the triumph of walking into the Calcutta office with the concession in his pocket. It was no mean feat to bring back in a day the thing that Whyler had not done in two weeks. Yet he did not want to gloat over Whyler. He had not come to Lalkand for that. He had come to return a service Whyler had once done for him.

He drew a paper from his pocket and handed it across the table.

"Here's the works," he said. "You can take it to Calcutta."

Whyler looked at him in silence.

"Sure," Spence went on. "I want you to get the credit for it. It's your job. You're my senior. And I'm deep in the red to you for pulling me out of the Hooghly that time. You take the paper down to Calcutta and I'll stay here to see that things keep in order."

If Spence had expected an outburst of gratitude for his magnanimity, he was mistaken. Whyler pensively chewed a mouthful of curry and filled his glass from a stone jug of ginger beer before replying.

"All right," he said at last. "I'll take it to Calcutta."

"You'd better get going right away, hadn't you?"

"I'll have my nap first," replied Whyler, wiping his red mustache with the back of his hand. "When you've been in India as long as I have, you won't be in such a rush, young fellow. Anyhow, by sleeping now I can ride all night and get to Kilipur Junction in time to make the down express at dawn."

"I don't think the down express stops at Kilipur."

"I'm sure it does."

"I think you're wrong."

"Listen, *chota sahib.*" Whyler pointed his fork at Spence. "I know the E. I. R. schedule like you know the multiplication table. The down express stops at Kilipur on signal."

"All I know," said Spence, "is that Daula of Asia Coal said he was waiting for the express yesterday morning, and an hour later I saw it run through without even slowing up."

Whyler put down his fork with a clang.

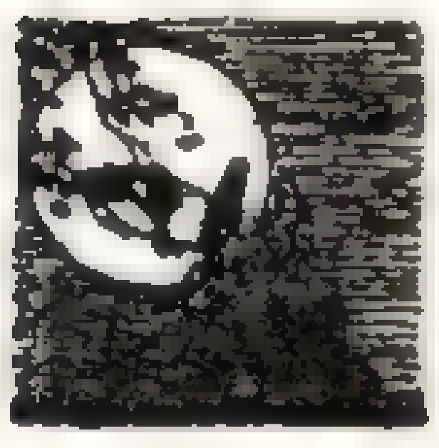
"You saw Daula at Kilipur yesterday?" he asked with sudden interest.

"Yes," said Spence. "And he didn't make the express."

"Well," said Whyler, pushing back his chair and tossing his napkin to the floor for the *khansama* to pick up, "maybe the schedule has been changed in the last two weeks. Maybe Daula had to wait for the local."

The two men separated, each going to his own room.

Spence had no desire to sleep. His mind was filled with conflicting thoughts. Satisfaction at having secured the *hajji's* word for the coal lands and helping Whyler clashed with a vague resentment at Whyler's delayed departure. He had a premonition that his comrade's failure to leave immediately was going to lead to complications of some sort. He was wondering what, as the mid-afternoon heat, sucking the life from the atmosphere, laid enervating fingers on his brow. The drowsy murmur of the holiday crowd, the hum arising from the prostrate village near the mosque lulled him. He slept.



HE WAS awakened by a rapid puffing and the impression that some one was standing beside his cot. He opened his eyes to see Bannerjee, his rotund Bengali servant, wild eyed and out of breath, gesticulating with the black cotton umbrella he used as a sunshade while walking.

"The Mohammedan gentleman of Kilipur refreshment room," gasped the Bengali, "is now in this town."

"Daula?" exclaimed Spence, rubbing his eyes with a hand clammy with perspiration.

"I am of opinion such is his name," said Bannerjee.

Spence stretched to wake himself completely.

"How do you know?" he asked.

"For last twenty hours I am in habit of visiting Hindu shrine other side of Lalkand," Bannerjee said. "And I met there a Marwari money changer who told me suspicious things. I reconnoitered and found this man to be here."

Daula in Lalkand! Of course, that confirmed the report that Asia Coal was after the Lalkand seam. But it was too late now. The *hajji* had signed the agreement. In a little while Whyler would be on his way to Calcutta with the concession for Bengal Collieries. He had saved the concession—he had saved Whyler. He was feeling well satisfied with himself as he climbed from under the mosquito bar and headed toward the boy-high earthenware jar in the corner that served as bathroom.

"All right, Bannerjee," said Spence, reaching for the tin dipper. "We'll keep an eye on Daula. And in the meantime you'd better rustle up a *tonga.* Whyler *sahib* is going to Kilipur Junction in a little while."

"Never mind the *tonga,*" said a voice. "I won't need it now."

Spence stopped splashing water over himself and stared at Whyler, leaning against the door frame, clad only in a towel about his ample girth, his graying hair disheveled, his eyes squinting from the smoke that curled up from his drooping cigaret.

"The trip's off," Whyler went on. "Somebody stole the *hajji's* agreement out of my room while I was asleep."

"Undoubtedly Mr. Daula!" broke in Bannerjee excitedly. "The Mohammedan gentleman! He is in Lalkand!"

"*Buss!*" shouted Whyler contemptuously. "Nobody asked you!"

"How the hell could anybody steal that

paper?" demanded the astounded Spence. "Didn't you have it put away?"

"I put it in my valise," said Whyler calmly, "but I must have forgot to lock the blooming thing. They ransacked the room."

"How'd they get in?"

"There's a door in the back. It must have been unlocked."

"And you didn't hear anything?"

"I'm a heavy sleeper." Whyler blew out a cloud of smoke.

Spence gripped the tin dipper as though to hurl it at Whyler's head. This cool carelessness unnerved him. If it were anybody else . . . The dipper clinked harmlessly to the brick floor. He rubbed himself furiously with a towel.

"Who stole it?" he asked at last.

"Very likely the very people that gave it to you," said Whyler. "They're tricky, those Mohammedans. I was suspicious when the *hajji* was so prompt in making the agreement. In this town the Moslems put the white man just below the pig. And you've been in India long enough to know that Moslems and pigs don't speak to each other. Rotten luck, I'd call it."

Spence was climbing into his clothes.

"Not as bad as if I didn't have another copy of the agreement," he said. "The *hajji* gave me a duplicate, signed and in due order—"

"For a *chota sahib*," Whyler broke in, "you're pretty smart."

"We can start, as scheduled," Spence went on. "I said 'we' because I'm going along. I want to help you, Mr. Whyler, and I'm going to. You'll be the one to present the agreement, and you'll take the credit. But I'm going to carry the paper as far as the Howrah station, because you're too careless, or too indifferent, or too something. These two weeks up here alone have got into you. You've got to pull yourself together, Mr. Whyler; you must."

"Let's not start tonight," said Whyler, studying his cigaret.

"Why not?"

"It would be murder. After what just happened, you can see for yourself we're watched. Somebody wants to stop us. If we leave by night, we'll be ambushed in the dark."

"If we're watched," said Spence, "that's all the more reason for us to hurry. We'll have to risk the ambush."

Whyler came over to sit on the cot. He wiped the perspiration from his ruddy forehead as he said:

"Wait until morning—for my sake. We can sneak away at dawn. By daylight we can protect ourselves. But at night I'm as good as a corpse. We'd be helpless in the dark."

Spence walked to the door and came back. He wanted to get started at once. Yet what Whyler said might be true.

"All right," he said, "for your sake. At dawn, then."

"Thank you, young man," said Whyler. "And now I'll get some clothes on me and a drink in me and go to see what I can find out."

As he left, Bannerjee picked up his umbrella and cleared his throat.

"I also will reconnoiter," he said. "I am bewildered by recent happenings. I seek enlightenment. In case of need you may call for me at Marwari money changer opposite Hindu shrine."

THE HOT, dusty day evaporated into blue, smelly night. Spence came out on the veranda to smoke a pipe while awaiting Whyler, and he noted that the little thermometer had dropped from 110° to 106°.

Evening prayer was over, but the crowds that swarmed to the call of the *muezzin* remained in the vicinity of the mosque. The undercurrent of religious excitement that had been vibrating beneath the placid surface of Lalkand since Spence's arrival was now surging into action. Frequent shouts were dashed above the murmur of the crowd like spray from a heaving sea. Lights flickered about a pit dug in the ground above the mosque. Tonight, the tenth of Moharram, the Taziyas—the symbolic biers of Ali—would be buried in the hole. Shaped to resemble the sacred tomb at Karbala, the biers were now being prepared for the night's procession. Spence watched the activity until Whyler came in, long after dark.

The two men ate with few words. Whyler said his look around had only confirmed his suspicion that the Moslems were trying to break the *hajji's* agreement.

"Did you see Daula?"

"You've got Daula on the brain," countered Whyler. "Why should I see Daula?"

"I hear he's in town," said Spence. "I have an idea that it's Asia Coal that's trying to checkmate us."

"Nonsense," said Whyler. "We'll get away at dawn and everything will be all right. Let's get to bed now so we'll have some rest."

Spence went to bed but not to sleep. The stuffy night air throbbed with the increasing frenzy of the Moharram celebration. The murmur of voices had risen to a roar. Wails and shouts of "Ya! Hasan! Ya! Husain!" pierced the tumult.

Spence tossed uneasily for awhile, then arose and looked down the slope toward the mosque. Torches streaked the darkness, bobbing about crazily, flashing back and forth in rhythm as the procession of biers wound about the mosque.

"Ya! Ali! Ya! Hasan!"

The two minarets of the mosque reached up into the night, glowing luridly in the wavering torchlight.

Spence crawled under his mosquito bar and closed his eyes. The noise pulsated in his ears. It became a drowsy rhythm, farther and farther away; it faded . . .

He dreamed that Whyler was at his throat, choking him. He struggled, with the helpless agony of nightmares. Somehow he could not raise his hands to tear away the strangling fingers. He tried to shout.

His impotent efforts awoke him. He was sitting up, gasping, wet with perspiration.

The room was empty, but outside the clamor had increased to a fury. It was louder, nearer. Rhythm was gone. Frantic voices were strained in a confused howl of rage.

Spence sprang from bed, unmindful of the mosquito bar. He untangled himself from torn strips of netting as he moved to the door.

The hot night was alive with frenzied shouts and quivering flares. After a few confused seconds, Spence realized what was happening and took an involuntary step backward. The mob had left the mosque and was charging up the hill. The torches were moving toward the *dak* bungalow. Already their smoky glow illuminated a shifting wave of turbans and distorted faces in the front rank.

A dark form came hurtling around the corner of the veranda, catapulting into the doorway to send Spence sprawling.

He squirmed from beneath a heavy body, scrambled to his feet and swung a chair above his head.

Before he could strike, the form rose panting to its knees and spoke in a high tenor.

"Please, sir!" said the voice of Bannerjee. "We must leave with greatest haste. They are after you."

"Who?" shouted Spence above the approaching tumult.

It was a useless question. The orange light from the torches was now dancing on the ceiling. Spence stepped into his shoes and felt for his revolver holster that he had hung on the chair beside his bed.

The holster was there but the gun was gone. He felt on the chair. Not there either. His hands groped over the floor.

"All of Islam is running this way!" cried Bannerjee. "They have gone stark mad! Somebody has turned a pig loose in the mosque! Quick, please!"

Spence straightened up. His gun was not on the floor. Some one had evidently taken it.

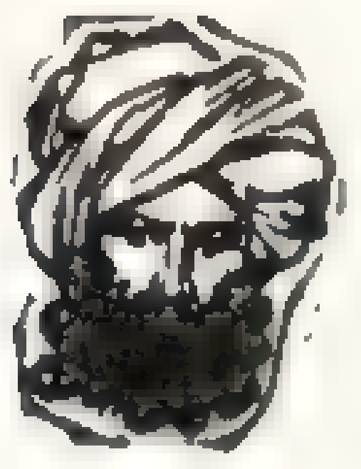
"A pig?" he echoed.

"An unholy pig squealing in the holy Masjid on this holy festival night. They are frantic. They say you did it. They want the blood of the young *sahib* at the *dak* bungalow. They are shouting *jihad*—war on infidels. We are both infidels.

Quick, please! I have a *gharri* waiting with a horse on the hill."

Spence smashed a chair on the floor. He wrenched off one of the legs as a club and snapped the rungs with his feet.

"First wake up Mr. Whyler," he said. "We'll have to get him out of this, too."



THE CREST of the howling wave was sweeping forward. The vanguard of a scattered few was only a few paces away. A Mohammedan with a torch streaked around Whyler's side of the bungalow.

Spence stepped out on the veranda, club in hand.

"No time for Mr. Whyler," whined Bannerjee. "Quick, please! To the rear!"

A missile whizzed past Spence's head and crashed against the wall.

"We'll take time," said Spence.

"Please, *sahib* . . ."

Unheeding, Spence pushed his way into Whyler's room.

A Mohammedan, gaunt and bearded, was there first. He held a torch, illuminating a scene of disorder.

The bed was empty.

Spence glanced quickly about. No Whyler.

The Mohammedan leaped toward him. A knife flashed.

Spence's right arm descended in a swift arc. The Mohammedan crumpled under the impact of the youth's club.

The torch dropped to the empty bed, licking up the mosquito net in a puff of flame. The bedclothes flared.

Spence pushed the burning cot across the room to block the entrance. The iron legs screeched on the brick floor.

Bannerjee tugged at his sleeve.

"The back door, sir. Quick, please!"

Spence hesitated. Whyler was gone. "Not tonight," he had said. He was evidently afraid of something. Perhaps he had made enemies during his fortnight at Lalkand. Perhaps they had taken him captive.

"This way, sir. The *gharri* is straight back of here."

"I'm not going to the *gharri*," said Spence. "I've got to find Mr. Whyler. They've carried him off. He's in danger."

"But the way is clear, sir. We can easily escape by this manner."

"I'm going to the mosque," said Spence. "I'm going to see the *hajji* and find out what they've done with Mr. Whyler."

"You'll be killed, sir. They are shouting *jihad!*"

"Run for the *gharri*, Bannerjee. Drive along the ridge and stop back of the mosque. Wait for us there. I'll join you with Mr. Whyler."

Bannerjee said something in reply, but the words were drowned in the renewed roar of the mob in front of the bungalow. He did not stop to repeat. Spence had never seen the portly Bengali move so rapidly.

The smell of smoke filled Spence's nostrils as he sprinted for a large banyan tree fifty yards to the side of the bungalow. He would not have a ghost of a chance charging through the mob to go directly to the mosque. In the shadows of the big tree he would have time to get his bearings and perhaps slip through the edge of the fanatical crowd.

The *dak* bungalow was on fire now. The thatch on the veranda roof was burning, and saffron brilliance leaped crackling from what had been Whyler's window. The flames wove grotesque patterns of shadow into the aerial roots of the banyan tree. As Spence moved silently among the hundred thick shoots growing downward into the earth from the spreading branches, he had the impression of being in a dense forest. From the far edge of the banyan he would make a break for the mosque, some three hundred yards away.

The mob, gathered in front of the burning bungalow, seemed quieter now. In the background the bearers of the Taziyas were still whirling in frenzied circles. Men were trying to get into the house.

Suddenly a man broke from the crowd and ran toward the banyan tree.

Spence put his hand into his shirt and felt the duplicate of his agreement with the *hajji.* Then he tightened his grasp on his club.

The running Moslem was now dodging among the aerial roots of the banyan tree. He had something in his arms.

Spence breathed more easily. The fellow had stolen a suitcase from the burning bungalow and was merely getting out of the crowd to examine his loot undisturbed. He was unaware of Spence's presence.

But he was coming closer now. Discovery seemed inevitable. A few paces separated the two men.

Spence raised his club.

Flames burst through the roof of the bungalow. A flash of orange penetrated the forest of roots, lighting up Spence's face.

The Mohammedan dropped the suitcase and yelled.

Spence's club descended. The Mohammedan bumped against a dangling root and slid limply to the ground.

But the shout had attracted attention. Spence swore. If he ran for it, the mob would be on his heels. If he stayed, he would be surrounded.

Men were already coming to investigate the cry from the banyan.

Spence ran.

For fifty feet he dodged hanging roots. Then he was in the open. A roar came from behind him—the cry of the pack starting in full pursuit.

Spence did not look back. He sped down the slope toward the mosque, straining to put more distance between himself and the clamor behind.

There were no firearms in the mob, apparently. They were even on that score. Missiles were flying, though. A knife clanged to the gravel in front of him. Something stung him back of the ear.

THE MOSQUE loomed ahead. Another hundred yards and he would sprint through the *hajji's* quarters. He was sure the *hajji* was there. He could not imagine the dignified old man taking part in this demonstration. He believed in his white bearded sincerity. The *hajji* would help him find Whyler—to save him. Faster—faster—

Spence stepped in a hole and stumbled. He fell forward, grating his knees and chin along the ground.

He was up again immediately. His lead was cut down. He redoubled his efforts. Something hit him in the back. His heart pounded as though it would burst from his breast. His legs belonged to some one else. He was no longer aware of making them run . . .

There! A few feet more. He bounded up the broad steps to the mosque platform. A figure in a turban and dirty white *dhoti* stretched out its arms and shouted. Fingers tore at Spence's sleeves as he dashed by, unheeding. His footsteps echoed down the colonnade of pointed arches.

Ahead was the chamber in which he had seen the *hajji* that morning. Was it only that morning? The door was closed. Spence butted against it. It gave. He tumbled in.

There was Whyler!

Thank God! There was Whyler—alive. He was slumped in a corner, a blank expression on his round, red face, his little mustache twitching. He seemed to have been in the midst of a conversation and to have stopped in the middle of a sentence. His mouth hung open. His right hand, a smoking cigaret between the fingers, was poised in a halted gesture.

Spence wondered why Whyler's expression did not change when he appeared in the doorway, why there was no look of recognition.

Then he noticed for the first time that Whyler was not alone. Squatting on the rug in front of him, his back to Spence, was a Mohammedan—the guard, undoubtedly. Whyler was probably afraid of arousing the guard, seeing that Spence was not armed. He had lost his club in the fall.

Then Spence put his hand into his coat pocket and grasped his pipe. Holding the bowl, he pushed out the stem to distend the corner of the coat in semblance of a revolver. He pointed the supposed gun at the dark patch of neck between the Mohammedan's white tunic and black velvet cap.

"Up with your hands, you!" cried Spence. "I've got him covered, Mr. Whyler. You're free. Make for the road at the top of the bluff. The *gharri's* up there. I'll follow. Go on."

The Moslem guard turned around. It was Daula, the Mohammedan agent for Asia Coal, wearing his native clothes. Daula grinned.

Whyler laughed aloud.

"What's all the excitement, *chota sahib?*" he asked, stepping on his cigaret butt.

"I thought they'd kidnaped you, Mr. Whyler. The crazy mob set fire to the *dak* bungalow. I went in to warn you and your cot was empty. Then I came here. The mob's after me, yelling *jihad!* They're outside."

"I'll keep 'em out—for awhile," said Whyler, going to the door and throwing the bolt. "I suppose you saved the duplicate agreement for the coal concession."

"Naturally."

"Better give it to me."

Spence hesitated.

"Give it to him," added Daula.

"I'll take it to Calcutta myself," said Spence.

"It's not going to Calcutta."

"Yes, it is. I'll see that you get the credit, Mr. Whyler."

"Credit." Whyler laughed. "God, what naive ninnies they send out East these days. Credit! I'm not interested in credit. I want cash. I'm not working for Bengal Collieries any more. I'm working for Sam Whyler—and, incidentally, Asia Coal."

Spence did not reply. Cogs were slipping into place in his brain. Thoughts whirred like wheels. Then an idea clicked. It was not a pleasant idea.

"*Chota sahib,* if you don't hand that paper over, I'll open the door. Just remember there's a mob outside looking for the man who defiled the mosque by turning loose a pig."

"I didn't do it."

"They will tear you to pieces anyhow," said Daula.

Spence turned toward the Mohammedan. He was grinning.

"Where's the *hajji?*" demanded Spence.

"Out playing cricket," replied Whyler.

When Spence turned to face Whyler he found himself looking down a warning finger of blued steel—his own automatic, the gun he had looked for at the bungalow a little while back.

"Hurry!" said Whyler, extending his left hand.

"Listen, Mr. Whyler," pleaded Spence. "I'm not arguing with you over my life. That's yours. You saved it once. But you can't throw down the company that way. They're counting on you. They think you're a *pukkah sahib.*"

"Young man, when you've been in India as long as I have, you'll know there aren't any *pukkah sahibs.*"

"Good God, Mr. Whyler, you must be drunk! A man who'd risk his life to save a fellow he hardly knew couldn't act like you're doing if he were sober."

Whyler laughed cynically.

"Don't try to appeal to his better nature," Daula broke in. "He has not got any."

"So you think I'm a high minded, self-sacrificing hero?" Whyler laughed. "Aren't you the innocent little *chokra,* though? Do you want to know why I fished you out of the Hooghly that time? I did it because you're the nephew of Clifford Spence, chairman of the board. I did it because I'd been slaving for thirteen years for Bengal Collieries and didn't have a cent; because I'd decided to be good to Sam Whyler at last; because saving the life of Clifford Spence's nephew would put me in a position to help myself. You're now privileged to watch the spectacle of a man helping himself. Give me that agreement."

ROY SPENCE swallowed. His hero was dead. The gallant, courageous Sam Whyler, the ideal Whyler of the past year, even the puzzlingly weak Whyler of the last day, were no more. These Whylers had been killed by this puffy faced, half drunk Sam Whyler who stood there brandishing a revolver and making threats. This Whyler was a stranger. He was an enemy. All obligations were off.

An impatient hammering resounded on the door back of Spence. Voices, staccato in anger, shouted the presence of the mob seeking the infidel who defiled the mosque.

Spence glanced at the door on the other side of the room. He wondered where it led.

Then he looked back at his own gun in the hands of Whyler—the enemy Whyler, the Whyler who had killed his ideal.

"All right, Mr. Whyler," said Spence, slowly raising his hands above his head. "You win. Take the agreement. It's in my inside pocket."

Whyler came greedily. He bent his head toward the youth as his left hand fished hurriedly inside Spence's coat. In his eagerness, the right hand grasping the gun drooped for a moment.

In that moment Spence's upraised hands became fists. They smashed downward together into the back of Whyler's neck. As Whyler slumped against him, Spence twisted the gun from his inert grasp.

Whyler straightened up almost immediately, dazed, blinking.

Spence backed away.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw something shine in Daula's extended hand.

He whirled.

The lamp hanging from the ceiling flickered twice as two explosions beat upon the air almost simultaneously.

Spence, his ears ringing, saw Daula glaring at him as from a great distance. Suddenly Daula sat down grotesquely, his dark lips twitching.

Whyler stood motionless, staring.

A hundred howls swelled in hideous discord outside the entrance. The mob was still waiting. Escape in that quarter was impossible. Yet he must get to Calcutta. First, to Bannerjee's *gharri*. He—

The other door. The other door might be the solution. He would try it, anyhow. He ran across the room. The door was not fastened. He opened it quickly and slammed it behind him.

Immediately he realized he had made a mistake. Why had he left Whyler free, active on his two feet, able to carry on his treacherous fight? He had had him at his mercy and had left him untouched and untrammeled. Was it that some vestige of Whyler the life-saver still stood between him and Whyler the enemy? Whatever it was, Whyler was probably taking Daula's gun at this very moment.

Spence leaned wearily against the door and felt in the dark for a lock. He touched a bolt and pushed it into place.

Then he turned and strained his eyes in an effort to make out something in the inscrutable darkness. This was not the clear, open darkness of a moonless night, but a close blackness that seemed almost tangible, alive, ready to strangle him for his intrusion. A breath of cooler air brushed his cheek furtively, coming from below. He put out one foot cautiously. It found no support. He withdrew it quickly.

He was standing on a ledge, apparently. He could feel the perspiration coursing down his face as he listened for some sound in the darkness, anything to break the pregnant silence of the obscurity.

The muffled howls of the mob pounding on the outer door came to him. Occasionally there were sounds from the next room; probably Whyler moving about. But from the darkness, only silence.

Again Spence put out a cautious foot, this time exploring downward. A breath of relief escaped him as his toe touched something solid. A step.

Another step. Carefully we went down a short stairway. Slowly he groped his way forward, afraid to strike a match. Once he stopped to listen. He thought he heard some one breathing, ahead in the darkness. But only the rush of blood in his ears, the sound of Whyler fumbling with a lock, and the noise of the mob came to him. He moved again.

Then he stumbled over something yielding.

There was a faint groan.

Spence ran a trembling hand over the thing that had tripped him.

He made out the form of a man, bound with ropes. His fingers touched a beard, then a rag tied tightly across the mouth. He tore away the gag.

"*Kya hai?*" came in a voice that Spence recognized.

"*Hajji!*" he breathed.

"A *ferengi?* Ah, the young *sahib.* Unbind me, *chota sahib.* Allah will reward you. The ropes hurt."

"Who did this, *hajji?*"

"Your—friend. The fat *sahib* who defiled the mosque with the stinking pig."

"Mr. Whyler?"

"The red faced tipsy European bound me when I discovered him with the pig, so that he and the renegade Daula could spread the false report that you were the defiler. *Ai! Chota sahib!* Easy! That hurts! There!"

"Daula is—I had to shoot him."

"He deserved it. And the fat *sahib?*"

"In the next room. That's Mr. Whyler, banging in the door."

"And—my people?"

"Outside, yelling *jihad.* Looks pretty bad for me, *hajji.* What's going to happen to the concession?"

The *hajji*, freed of his bonds, stood up.

"Come," he said, taking Spence's arm.

Whyler had stopped banging on the door, but the mob was still howling.

Spence followed the *hajji* through the darkness, up a stairway, and through a short, dark corridor. They came out in a little court.

"You still have the agreement I wrote for you this morning?"

"I have one copy—yes."

"Then you must get it through to your *burra sahib* in Calcutta. My word is still good. Only you must get the paper away to safety. Can you leave Lalkand quickly once you are outside?"

"I have a *gharri* waiting on the bluff."

"Then you must go by that gate." The *hajji* pointed.

Outside the furor continued.

"*Ya! Ali! Ya! Hasan!*" Moving feet stamped in rhythm. "*Ya! Husain!*" The fanaticism of the Moharram festival had not abated.

"Is that the only exit?"

"Yes."

* * *

HE WOULD have to make it, then, Spence thought quickly. If it were the only gate, Whyler must know of it. That is why he had stopped banging on the door inside—to come and cut off his retreat here. Still, he would take a chance with Whyler—with Whyler the enemy, if Whyler the hero would not interfere. That crowd of fanatics was the real danger.

"*Ya! Husain! Ya! Hasan!*"

"What about the *jihad?*" asked Spence.

The *hajji* lifted his bearded face to heaven. Directly above the court, one slender minaret glowed orange in the light from the torches outside the wall. But behind the minaret the night sky was beginning to pale. The first hot breath of another day would soon be on the lips of dawn.

"I will do my best to help you," said the *hajji.* "Stand here and count slowly to one hundred. When you have finished, open the gate, and may Allah guide you safely."

Spence watched the *hajji* walk toward the base of the minaret. He started to count.

One, two, three, four, five, six—the *hajji* was climbing a ladder that led up the tower—twenty-nine, thirty, thirty-one . . . The old Moslem moved slowly and stiffly. He hesitated . . . Fifty-five, fifty-six . . . It was a long climb. He was scarcely halfway up. Sixty-nine, seventy—he was climbing again; he seemed to be mounting more rapidly; he was nearing the circular balcony—ninety-one, ninety-two, ninety-three . . . Spence turned from watching the Moslem and faced the gate.

"*Ya! Ali! Ya . . !*"

Ninety-nine, one hundred.

He unfastened the lock and pulled the heavy door toward him.

The swirling mass of men, dancing turbans, distorted faces, saffron flares, flashed before him.

A tall, long jawed Pathan with an astrakhan cap suddenly stopped shouting, grabbed a companion by the arm and pointed. The word passed. A dozen men broke for the door.

Spence drew his automatic and shouted something that impressed him immediately as futile. What good were five shots against a hundred fanatics?

Then, far above, sounded a high, nasal tenor call.

The big Pathan stopped.

"*Lá illáha illá 'lláh Mohammed Rasulu 'lláh* . . ."

The call to the faithful droned on, stilling the roar of the mob to an intermittent muttering.

The Pathan glanced at the sky. There were indeed signs of daybreak, and it was therefore time for first devotions. A little early, perhaps, but . . .

"*Lá illáha illá* . . ."

He dropped to his knees.

The crowd bowed forward like a field of rice before the morning breeze.

Now they were touching their foreheads to the ground.

Spence started to run. Then he saw one figure still standing—a portly figure, beyond the crowd, erect on the mound of earth beside the pit dug for burying the Taziyas. The youth clutched his gun.

Something made him hesitate again. That something, Whyler, the hero. The man who saved his life. The ideal Whyler wanted to live . . .

He blinked at a puff of flame. An explosion knocked him down. He had difficulty getting up. His left leg was numb. Whyler was still standing there—Whyler, the enemy. Whyler was shooting at him. This man wanted to kill—not only him, but the ideal Whyler. Spence had come to Lalkand to save the ideal Whyler. *He would save him!*

He squeezed the trigger.

There was nobody standing on the mound beside the hole now. The man had disappeared. He would be buried with the Taziyas.

The numbness had gone from Spence's leg. It was on fire now. The burning pain mounted. Some one very near sobbed.

Spence limped painfully toward the top of the bluff, where Bannerjee's *gharri* was waiting.

Hours later the sleepy *khansama* of the Kilipur Junction railway refreshment room turned up the dim kerosene lamp as a fat Bengali helped a pale, limping young man into a chair.

The young man closed his eyes a minute, his colorless lips pressed together in pain. He seemed to be listening to the frogs in a paddy field, making the hot night vibrate with their shrill chorus.

"A stiff brandy peg and a telegraph form," said the pale young man.

After drinking the brandy, he took a pencil and addressed a telegram to the Bengal Collieries, Ltd, Calcutta:

MR. WHYLER KILLED IN HEROIC DEFENSE OF OUR RIGHTS AGAINST ASIA COAL GUNMAN. HIS LOYAL EFFORTS SECURED CONCESSION FOR LALKAND SEAM FROM MOSLEM AUTHORITIES. BRINGING HIS PAPERS BY TONIGHT'S PUNJAB MAIL.

—SPENCE

THE BELLS OF *El Valle Perdido*

A Story of a Lost Mexican Treasure, and a Black Sheep Who Found his Salvation in the Quest of It

By ARTHUR O. FRIEL

HAL WOODFORD, scion of an aristocratic New York family, and Doug Graham had been chums during their college years; then Graham, who had his fortune to make, drifted and New York heard vaguely of his adventuring in far lands. And while Doug Graham followed his rainbows, Hal Woodford gradually lost what individuality he ever had under the relentless thumb of parental authority—the Westchester Woodfords whose every step was dictated from birth by tradition.

And the night that Doug Graham blew into his New York club, Hal Woodford sat drinking himself into the frame of mind needful to accept the society girl of his parent's choosing for marriage.

Doug Graham remembered a different Hal Woodford—a fighting Woodford of the football field; and it was to that Woodford that he issued his challenge.

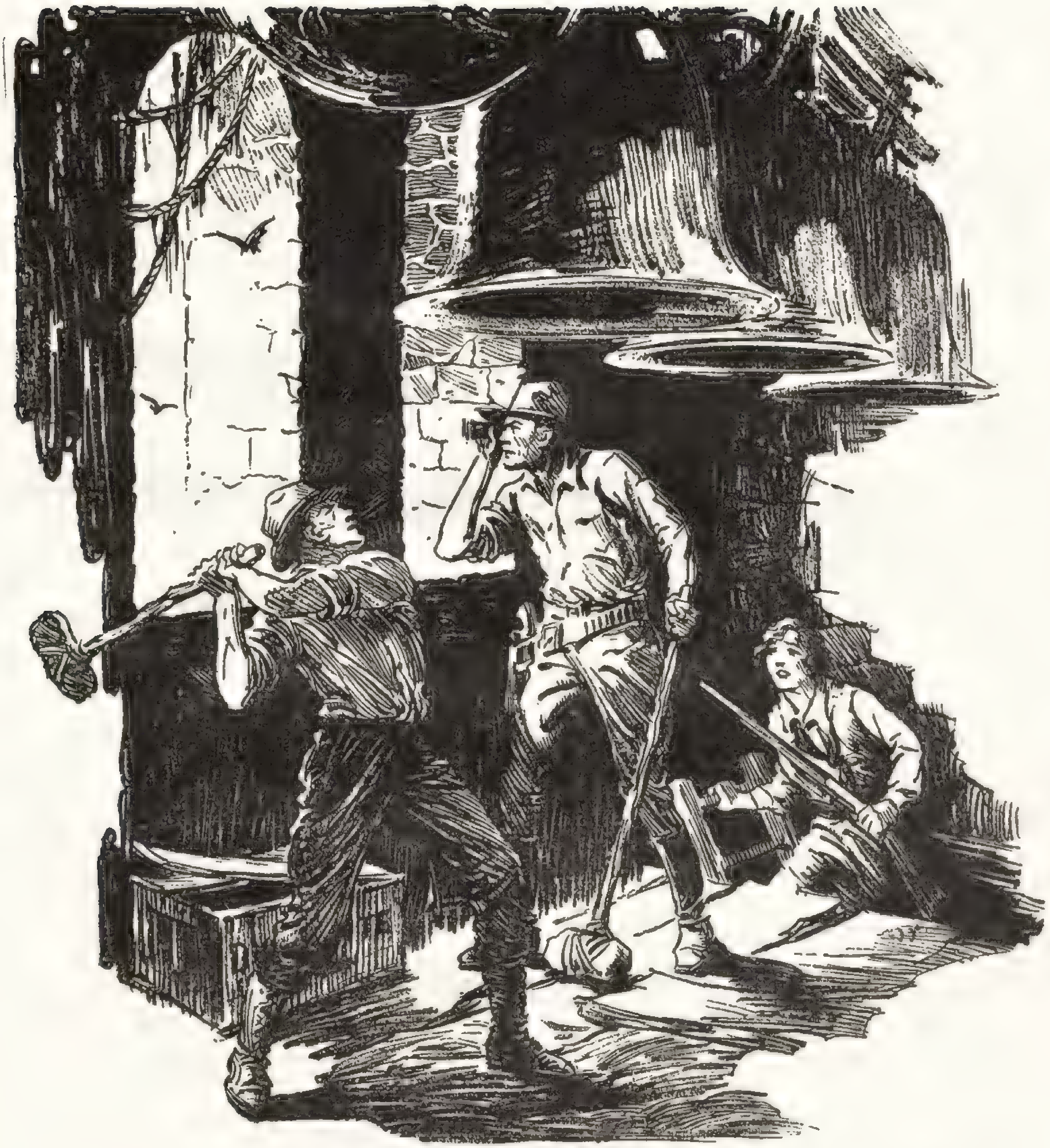
"I'm going to take a trip soon—Mexico . . ."

A few weeks later Hal Woodford was just a name in New York's clubs and drawingrooms; and by the side of lean Doug Graham a stocky young man who answered to the name of Hal Ford toiled over a Mexican hill into sight of El Valle Perdido—with its legendary silver mine, and its magnificent ruined church etched against the brassy sky. Doug Graham's journey was ended; but Hal Ford's quest in search of manhood was just beginning.

While the Graham party was looking over the ruins a band of Mexican outlaws appeared—with two white girls captive. Graham bluffed the leader of the bandits out of a fight for possession of the shelter of the church; and taunted him into a gamble for the girls. The American won and forthwith became guardian of the Señoritas Juana and Anita Raymond.

That night Doug Graham's picked men, under a merry cutthroat by the name of Pancho, dropped informally into the camp of the bandits—a detachment of the great and dreaded Zinzimeo—and wiped them out. And the next day Doug Graham discovered the ancient mine, its sealed tunnels stacked with bars of solid silver.

Juana Raymond, the older of the sisters, grew close to Graham, and she



CONCLUSION OF A TWO-PART NOVEL

told him of the legend of the ancient cathedral bells; if ever they sounded it would mean peace and happiness in El Valle Perdido again—the mine would be worked by the religion starved Indians waiting in the hills for the divine manifestation.

Then one morning Graham saw something against the side of a far mountain.

"It's the Zinzimeo outfit; more than a hundred of them. We're in for something, Hal . . ."

HE PASSED the binoculars. For several minutes Woodford scanned the inexorably approaching force. Meanwhile Graham thoughtfully rubbed his chin, strode to the stairway and vanished. Before the gazer lowered the glasses and looked for him, he was down in the nave and acting.

The Mexicans sat in the wide doorway, smoking after breakfast. A rapid fire of Spanish from El Señor lifted them to their feet and sent them on the run to bring in the horses from their stables in near huts. Before they had even left the steps he was sprinting to the dormitory. At the table he found Juana and Anita still leisurely eating and talking.

"Sorry, girls," he curtly apologized, "but I'm in a rush. Company is coming."

"Who?" quickly asked Juana.

"Zinzimeo, unless I'm a poor guesser. Anyway, somebody undesirable. About a hundred of him."

He strode into an unused corridor, returning quickly with an armful of rifles—the guns of the *zopilotes* who now lay buried on the blocked road. Dropping these on the table, he turned to an open pack and snatched from it boxes of cartridges.

The girls sat rigid. Then Juana sprang up and ran to him.

"Can I help you?" she asked, dropping to her knees beside the pack.

"No. Go finish your breakfast."

He rummaged farther, glanced at an unopened pack, drew a knife, slashed its ropes.

"How did you find them?" she queried.

"Eh? Oh, I was up in the bell tower. By the way, the bells have no tongues. Now go back and eat, will you? We may be busy soon."

His words were jerky, his face set with concentrated purpose. She studied him, then looked at the slitted walls.

"A hundred against eight," she mused aloud.

"Against six," he corrected.

"Against eight!" she contradicted. "If you think Anita and I will let ourselves be captured again you don't know us. And if you think we can't shoot, watch us! Daddy taught us how to use guns years ago. We were caught asleep at Jacuariago—the bandits came at siesta time—but we are awake now!"

"Good girl!" he approved. "Hope you won't have to do any shooting, but we may need to use everything we've got."

He tossed out more cartons of ammunition. Suddenly he paused, struck by a new thought. Juana, too, stared at nothing as if glimpsing a strange stratagem.

"That reminds me of something," he muttered. "Yes, *por Dios*, that will be a hot welcome!"

"What?" she thrust.

"Never mind. It's nothing you'll want to witness, believe me. You girls can stay right here and keep quiet. We chaps will deliver our first salute from the belfry, and—"

"The belfry!" she caught him up. "*Sí*, the belfry! Señor, go to that belfry at once! And ring the bells!"

He stared. Her eyes were dilated, her expression that of an inspired seer.

"Ring the bells?" he echoed. "Why? How?"

"Ring them! Ring them! Find a way! Ring them!"

She started up, grasping his shoulder with imperative haste. Still he stared. Then a light flickered over his face. In an odd tone he replied:

"Witch, there may be something in that. I'll try it. While I'm gone, make sure that all these guns are loaded, if you don't mind."

"Go! Go!"

He went. Down the stairway he dashed, grinning queerly. As he departed, Anita arose and ran to aid her sister at the loading of the guns. Momentarily shocked speechless and motionless by the news that the brutal Zinzimeo was near, she now was nerved to desperate resistance.

Near the bottom of the stairs Graham met Woodford; seized him, turned him, ran him to the nave.

"What now?" excitedly asked the shorter man.

"I'm not sure. But I feel like ringing the bells."

"How?"

"Never mind. I'll fix that. We're in a jam, Hal, and anything we can do won't make it any worse. Maybe I made a mistake yesterday by exploding that dynamite and notifying the world that somebody was here. Or maybe not. Anyway, there's going to be more noise around here, and we may as well start it right. Come on!"

They ran together to the big outer door, where they met the Mexicans leading in the small troop of horses. To the brown fellows Graham volleyed a mouthful of vernacular which made them gape in amazement, turn back and scatter in quick quest. A few words of English followed. Then the two señores herded the beasts inside the stout walls. While they did so, their gunmen wonderingly gathered the most primitive and puerile of weapons—sticks and stones.

A few minutes later the huge wooden door swung shut. Old but stout bars slid into strong sockets. Graham and Pancho glanced around at the lofty windows, inaccessible to assailants not equipped with long ladders. Then said the tall señor, in placid Spanish:

"All right, boys. Take it easy. I'll be back. And don't be surprised by anything you hear while I'm gone. I'm going to play a little joke."

"*Muy bien, señor,*" assented the soft voiced Pancho. "But do not be gone too long."

Then, with a merciless horde coming against them, the four natives squatted, lighted cigarets and awaited the promised joke. And the man who had promised it selected long sticks and medium sized stones from the pile brought in, spoke to his partner, and strode with him to the belfry stairs.

More minutes passed. Then . . .

Bong! Bong! Bong! Bing-bang-bong! Boom! Boom! Bang-blup-bong-g-g!

Ragged but resonant, for the first time in centuries, the bells of the tall tower were once more hurling their voices out to the mountains.

CHAPTER XIV

INTERLUDE

FOR SEVERAL minutes the sonorous tones of the old bronzes rolled abroad. After the first few discordant strokes they became regular, rhythmic, solemnly strong. At length, with a final *boom* of the deepest bell, they ceased.

"That'll do," decided Graham, breathing rather hard.

He dropped a lengthy pole, to the end of which was tied a stone, which had been beating the metal. Woodford, panting, gladly let a similar invention slide through his tired hands to the floor. Both turned to look northwestward.

The string of dark ants on the dun mountainside had stopped. For another minute or two it remained motionless. Then, as if obeying some order, it resumed progress.

Graham waved a hand mockingly and turned stairward.

"So long, *caballeros,*" he called. "We'll meet you in church, maybe. Come on, Hal."

He ran downstairs. Woodford stood watching the march of the invaders. His lips tightened. Fleeting glints of light along the line testified that rifles, hitherto slung from saddles, now were bared to the sun and gripped in purposeful fists.

"Come on, you bums!" he soliloquized. "I've been waiting a long time for something like you to happen in my young life. If you're so ignorant that you don't know everything's peaceful here after the bells ring, that's your hard luck. Keep coming!"

Then, with a hard grin, he hurried down the steps to learn the next move in the game.

Down in the nave, Pancho was gently asking Graham:

"Just what is the joke, señor? We do not yet understand it."

Graham answered with a slight smile, but with serious voice.

"The joke is on those who come. Those bells above us have no tongues. The old *padres* decreed that—er—that the men who could ring them would be lucky after that. So now good fortune is on all our shoulders. But those *hombres* yonder don't know it yet, so we may have to teach them."

The Mexicans stood thoughtful, then smiled joyously. Outwardly irreverent but innately religious, they found the tale of priestly benediction gripping their minds and fortifying their souls. Hitherto they had awaited the almost inevitable fight with stoical resolution, trusting to their fortress, their leader and their personal prowess. Now they felt backing them the mysterious, mighty right arm of God.

Graham regarded them all, looked meaningly at Pancho, walked several paces away, and paused. The Mexican boss joined him. Between them passed a few words which brought to the brown face a wolfish grin and turned the brown eyes toward baggage packs resting against a far wall. The Northerner glanced behind him, saw Woodford approaching from the *campanario,* beckoned and swung away toward the dormitory. The two ascended together.

Juana and Anita, standing at gun slits, wheeled at the sound of heels. They held no weapons; they had been gazing out at the line of ants. But on the table lay ten rifles fully loaded and, beside them, cartridge boxes with tops removed and brass shells awaiting seizure.

"Your housekeeping is perfect, girls," approved Graham. "Our guests can't say we're not prepared to entertain them. And they can't find fault with our welcome, either. We've rung the bells, and that, as I understand it, means that peace rules here forevermore. Do you happen to know that story, Señorita Juana? Yes? Well, I thought maybe you did. But the question now in my mind is: Just when does peace become effective?"

"*Á quien madruga,*" she flashed back, "*Dios le ayuda!*"

"Meaning?" puzzled Woodford.

"Eh? Oh, to be literal," explained Graham, "that means: 'God helps him who rises early.' Which, in this instance, means that peace will be here after we knock merry hell out of our uninvited guests, and that we'd better start knocking. Which, in turn, sounds reasonable, and is already in preparation. In fact, Lady Witch—" he looked back at Juana "—your idea and mine fit together perfectly, as far as I can see at the moment. And I'm backing your lead to the limit. The results will be apparent in due course. And it won't be long now."

He turned his gaze away, scanned the guns, the wall slits, the arched exit to the stairway. But, absently, he talked on.

"Hal, it's really too bad that you don't know Spanish better. Maybe if you looked around a bit you might find an instructor who—oh, excuse me. For a woman hater you're doing quite well."

His roving eyes had come back. Now he picked two rifles from the table, turned, departed with a wicked grin. And Woodford, glancing sidewise, discovered that Anita was standing very close beside him, and that somehow his right arm had stolen around her, and that the posture seemed entirely natural to them both.

"Oh, I beg your pardon!" he muttered.

Crimson cheeked, he broke away, grabbed a gun, hurried stairward. So hasty was his embarrassed retreat that he failed to hear Anita's low reply—

"Oh, please don't apologize!"

CHAPTER XV

THUNDERBOLTS

HOOFS clattered on the cobbles; hoofs advancing, unhurried but unhesitant, along both streets flanking the church. Their drumming echoed from the vacant houses, smote the walls of the lost cathedral, filled the belfry with a monotone of menace.

Up in that belfry a small fire, almost smokeless, burned in the center of the floor. At the arches where the bells had recently flung loud challenge, six men peered slyly downward. Undetected, they watched a hard faced horde pour from both sides into the *plaza,* gather into a disorderly mass and sit scanning the whole front of the closed building. Then, while abused horses overburdened with loot drooped wearily, came a moment of silence.

The invaders were a motley array of mongrels, in all sorts of garments. Some wore complete suits of stained blue or of dirty white, with ornate sombreros; some had only shirts, overalls and dingy straw hats or greasy caps. Between these extremes were vests, *serapes*, ponchos, any sort of masculine garb. And the faces were of all gradations of yellow or brown. The only uniformity among them was in weapons and in merciless readiness to use them. Every fist held a rifle, every body was heavily banded with cartridges, every visage bore the stamp of the inborn vices which made them the scum of Mexico.

At their head sat a man almost white, gorgeously caparisoned, extraordinarily broad of shoulder; a man in whom seemed to be combined the brute strength of a gorilla and the acumen of a Caucasian. Upright, fiercely dominant, he studied the inscrutable church with his one eye. The other lid hung far down, habitually attempting to conceal the blindness of the left optic. His left arm, too, hung loose, hand in pocket, shoulder bulky with bandages concealed beneath his coat. Somebody had recently shot him. And, as leader of a wolf pack, he was the more ferocious for his wound. The commander of wolves must be strong or be torn apart by his own subordinates.

"*Quien viva?*" he suddenly bellowed.

His roar echoed from the silent walls. Long seconds passed. Then from the tower fell solemn tones:

"*Quien habla?* Who speaks?"

"Zinzimeo!" came the arrogant retort. "Open the door!"

All bandit eyes centered on the belfry. At first they saw only shadowy bells. Then, within an arch, they discerned the head and shoulders of a tall man looking coolly down.

"The door does not open to such as you," the deep voice refused. "This place is sanctuary. Go your way!"

Zinzimeo stared. His rabble gaped. All now perceived that the lofty speaker was white. And his manner was that of a *padre*. None had expected to find here the one, much less the other. All had thought the bell ringing to be the defiance of some rival gang of marauders, and had come ready to oust the seizers of their own chosen lair. But a priest—that was slightly different. In these priest killing times, one who spoke with such assurance was likely to be backed by a force of straight shooting Cristeros — militant churchmen whose faith made them dangerous antagonists.

Zinzimeo swung a slow gaze to right and left, shrewdly viewing again the ruined huts. Then, reassured by the desolation of the place, he grinned sneeringly.

"High talk!" he jeered. "But not high enough. In truth, I much doubt that you are the *padre* you pretend to be. If you are, open the door and give us your blessing."

His one eye glittered snakily. His followers showed their teeth. The white man above them stood silent.

"Open!" bellowed Zinzimeo, swiftly belligerent. "Open this door before I smash it in. Open, *cabrón!*"

The eyes and lips of the man on high contracted. *Cabrón*, he goat, is the fighting word of Mexico, signifying unprintable moral turpitude.

"Perhaps, *cabrón*," Zinzimeo repeated the insult, "you are the animal which kicked down a hillside on my advance guard. And perhaps you have a pair of young white *cabras*—she goats—inside your corral. At any rate, I yearn to meet you face to face, *muy pronto*. Come down!"

HIS MEN, absorbing his insolence, straightened in their saddles. Their upturned countenances became more menacing. But the lone figure in the tower spoke as coolly as ever.

"Zinzimeo, you do not enter here. You are unfit to come within these walls. Go, before the wrath of God falls on you!"

"Bah!" snarled the bandit. "This for your walls, and you too!"

Jerking out a military pistol, he fired.

The heavy bullet knocked dust from the tower a few feet below the autocratic pseudo-priest. Unmoved, he spoke for the last time.

"You have had your warning," he announced. Then he stepped back deliberately and disappeared.

A raucous chorus of jeers burst from the rabble. Several rifles loosed wanton shots. The largest bell, hit by a flying slug, gave forth an angry *boom.*

Zinzimeo grinned, holstered his weapon, barked over a shoulder:

"A wind bag, that one! Go find a battering ram, and we shall slit his empty belly!"

Harsh mirth responded. Several men on the edges and rear of the mass cantered away in random search. The others sat at ease, waiting. Suddenly they tensed, dodged, then relaxed and howled with laughter. From the tower had fallen a brief, ragged hail of stones.

The missiles had flown all over the pack, hitting men and horses, stinging as they struck, startling them into momentary motion. But they were merely stones, ridiculously ineffective against the hard bitted raiders who scorned anything less deadly than bullets. After the first surprise they swayed in their saddles with tumultuous mirth.

"The wrath of God!" bellowed their ferocious general, wiping his one eye with his one good hand. "*Diablo,* what idiots! Imagine throwing pebbles at the wolves of Zinzimeo! Ha!"

His jackals howled the louder, watching the belfry, awaiting another shower. It came soon.

Up under the bells, Graham had incisively instructed his small gang:

"Throw these stones to get the range. Throw them high, to drop straight. Pancho, take the rear; Lorenzo, the right; Miguel, left; Hilario, front. Hal, you and I heave into the middle of the outfit. Let's go!"

So the stones had gone forth, accustoming arms to swift hurls and eyes to the targets. The eyes just cleared the top of the narrow outer balcony, seeing, yet unseen from below. Now, as the brigands belched ridicule, the commander of the defenders snapped:

"Good enough! Now throw for your lives! Throw quick and hard! And let nothing slip from your hands!"

He set the example. He stooped, touched something to the fire, whirled, threw, turned back to repeat. The others, eyes ablaze, swiftly followed suit. For a few flashing instants the outer air grew thick with more missiles arching upward, dropping fast. The wolf pack laughed uproariously, stood up in stirrups, trying to catch them and pitch them back. Some few were caught. But none came back.

With terrific reports and frightful effect the stones exploded. To right and left and front and rear, on the ground or in the air, they smashed earth and flesh into spattering fragments. The Zinzimeo horde, blown apart, dispersed in frenzied rout.

As it fled, the bombers above became riflemen. Leaping to the balcony, they poured bullets into receding backs. Riders collapsed, fell, lay limp on the ground or dragged from the stirrups of madly galloping steeds. Then the torn *plaza* was bare of life.

The men in the belfry slowly relaxed. The Mexicans gloated on the scene of destruction below. Woodford loosed a yell of fierce exultation.

"We've smashed them, Doug!" he shouted. "Blown them to hell! Wow! What a scrap!"

"Scrap nothing," depreciated his partner. "You haven't seen anything yet. This was just the opening bombardment of a tough war, unless we got Zinzimeo himself. And I don't see anything down there that looks like him. Don't fool yourself. He's a hard egg, and we have something he wants, and he knows it, and if he's still alive he'll come back to get it. And when he does, our dynamite is apt to be no good. We haven't much left, anyway."

He wheeled to the Mexicans.

"Boys, go down and see if you can find Zinzimeo's head," he ordered. "Fifty pesos to the finder! If it's not there come back quickly and bar the door tight. Go on!"

They went, first grasping extra rifles, fully loaded. Their bare feet shuffled downstairs, were gone. Graham trampled on the small flame with his thick soled boots, extinguishing it. Then he picked up one of the long poles. .

"Let's hammer the bells again," he prompted, "and tell the world that we're still here and going strong."

He struck a booming note. Woodford turned, now somewhat pale, from contemplation of the littered *plaza*. His battle frenzy was already reacting, his lifelong hope for lurid adventure recoiling from the aftermath of actuality. Snatching up the other stone tipped stick, he attacked the green bells with fervid blows.

Graham, expressionless, pounded other bronze shells at random. His gray gaze roved from arch to arch, covering the rugged crests of the hills. What he sought there was known only to himself and to a tall girl in another tower.

Down in the *plaza* Pancho and his followers vainly sought the head of Zinzimeo, who, though blown off his horse, had scuttled to safety and away. Outside the town, panic stricken survivors of the "wrath of God" rode wheresoever they might, then slowed and, with the primitive instinct of an animal herd, drew together again. Out in the hills, other men who had heard repeated thunders and recurrent jangles went into excited conclave.

At length the metallic voices ceased. Leather heels clumped downward. In the belfry remained only a dead fire, spent cartridge shells, a few scattered stones, and several sinister cylinders to which were affixed short lengths of fuse. The bells hung once more voiceless. Over the valley again brooded silence—but not peace.

CHAPTER XVI

SPOILS OF WAR

LONG before the dazed, unhorsed Zinzimeo could collect and control his appalled mongrels, the pitted *plaza* had been harvested by Pancho's gang.

Although the fifty peso head was not to be found among those scattered over the square, many other articles of practical value were gleaned: rifles, revolvers, cartridge belts, knives, and other spoils, ranging from ornate sombreros to packs of loot cut from accidentally slain beasts of burden. The salvagers worked quickly, yet coolly, overlooking nothing worth transportation indoors. Meanwhile, from near and far, black buzzards flew to do their duty.

By the time cautious scouts peered from behind corners of huts flanking the battlefield, the great door was once more shut. Up in the shady belfry Lorenzo kept watch. Down in the cool nave his fellows tested the actions of the captured firearms, then opened the packs and exclaimed over their jumbled contents. Some of the things they found aroused mirth; others made them stare or scowl.

"The devils sacked a church," declared Pancho. "Behold this beautiful cross, these holy vessels, all of solid gold. They are—"

"What are they worth?" greedily interrupted Miguel.

"This is no time to consider that, pig!" rebuked his commander. Then his frown dissolved into a sudden laugh at Hilario, who had draped on his burly body a long white dress and stood with ludicrous assumption of coquetry.

"Kiss me, sweet *caballero!*" lisped the merrymaker, protruding unshaven lips.

Miguel lay back and howled. Pancho doubled with mirth, gasping a ribald retort which made his mates guffaw in chorus. Then, straightening, he looked thoughtful.

"That dress would fit the tall señorita," he judged. "And both of them must be aching for a change of clothes. See what else you can find."

Much else was found. Some brigand, mindful of a sweetheart somewhere behind him, or hopeful of a new one ahead, had helped himself to expensive feminine apparel in some home or store. This, when examined and broadly commented upon, Pancho laid carefully over an arm and carried upstairs. In one hand he took also the gold cross.

"With the compliments of the noble General Zinzimeo," he smilingly announced, entering the refectory. "He carried away his head, señor, but he may bring it back to us. In the meantime he has left these gifts for the señoritas and for the church."

Graham and Woodford, cleaning their rifles, looked curiously at the contributions which he laid on the table. Juana and Anita, standing at wall slits, deserted their self-appointed posts.

"There are about thirty dead men in the *plaza*," continued the Mexican, lowering his tone, "some blown apart, some overthrown and trampled in the rush, some shot in the back. Also about twenty horses. Also a few thousand buzzards."

"Thank God for that!" muttered Graham.

"*Sí.* At times the *zopilotes* are most useful. But, to speak of things more important, every dead man had a rifle and a knife, and most of them had revolvers also. So we now have an arsenal. It is a pity we can not beget all the men we could arm. If we could—"

"Oh, Juana! See! Clean clothes!"

Anita's voice joyously cut across his murmur. Her small hands lovingly felt silk stockings at the top of the pile. Then her wide eyes darted to the faces of the men, dropped; her cheeks crimsoned.

Juana's gaze, too, dwelt eagerly on the alluring finery. But she betrayed neither impulse nor confusion. Soon she looked gratefully at the brown fellow.

"Señor Pancho," she said, "we thank you for your thoughtfulness."

"*Es nada, señorita,*" he responded, involuntarily doffing his sombrero. "It is nothing."

She smiled, swept the little heap of luxury from the wood, and walked toward her bedroom, followed closely by Anita. The two faded into the dim corridor and were gone.

The men smiled. Pancho ostentatiously swirled his heavy hat back on his head. It was a wondrous sombrero, made of felt, wealthy with silver thread and immeasurably superior to the dingy straw he had previously worn; in fact, the best hat found in the *plaza*.

"As I was saying, señores," he resumed, "I—ah—hum! What was I saying?"

"That you had the most beautiful sombrero in Mexico," grinned Graham. "And I quite agree with you."

Pancho beamed and tossed the headgear to the table.

"It is yours, señor," he bowed. "As I was saying—"

"Many thanks, but I don't need it just now. Put it on again."

The Mexican obeyed with alacrity.

"And, as I was about to say," pursued the Northerner, "your courtesy to the señoritas is heartily appreciated. And, as I was about to ask, did you find any food in the packs?"

"None, señor," regretted the other. "The beasts carrying the victuals must have gone unhurt. But we have food enough for several days. And by that time—"

He shrugged. Graham nodded.

"Quite right, *amigo.* By that time we can find more food, or we shall need none."

He picked up his rifle, squinted along the bore, reached for another bit of cleaning rag. Pancho, thus tacitly dismissed, sauntered stairward with a bit of swagger. Thanked by his most respected señor and señorita, trusted with unquestioned loot below stairs, crowned by a most admirable hat, he was exceedingly well pleased with himself.

When he was gone Graham thoughtfully regarded the gold cross.

"What's the hunch now, Doug?" asked the observant Woodford.

The gray eyes moved to the ancient slits beyond which lay the mysterious mountains.

"I don't quite know, Hal. It's just working. I can see a thing or two vaguely, and I feel something else on the way, but I don't quite get the combination yet. However, one thing seems to be fitting into another, and—"

He paused, looking now at the corridor down which Juana had vanished. Presently his gaze swung back to the cross, then rested on his scattered dice. With a sweep of one hand he gathered up the cubes. With the other he drew out their leather case. Rapidly he thumbed them into the container and shut it. Then he tossed it at one of the open packs beside the wall.

Woodford smiled slightly, glanced at the doorway through which the sisters had vanished, but held his tongue. It was plain enough that the inanimate squares which had counseled the gambling adventurer in many a moment of doubt had had their day, and that now a more vital intuition was his guiding influence.

"And," added Graham, "when the whole puzzle is put together I think it will make a satisfactory picture. Anyway, here's hoping. It's all rather queer thus far. I, an agnostic, am steered here by a priest. And then comes a girl who somehow divines the location of the mine. And after that comes this cross, swiped from some other church. And it looks as if something or somebody were moving us all around to work out some sort of game, and in the end it will—"

He stopped short, then seized a loaded rifle. Woodford dropped his half cleaned gun and snatched another. Both men sprinted to the stairs.

Outside rattled a staccato fusillade. Zinzimeo had come back.

CHAPTER XVII

GUARDS

THE flurry of new attack died out as quickly as it had begun. Indeed, it was not even a real assault. It was but a burst of senseless firing loosed by mongrels once more united and maddened by what they saw in the *plaza*. Sweeping into the open, they hurled a hail of bullets, then, having vented unreasoning anger, divided and fled. The only results of their outbreak were pockmarks on the dense door, spurts of dust from the stone walls and a loud clang from a smitten bell. By the time the five men running up the *campanario* reached its top, no live enemy was in sight.

"*Tres*," succinctly announced Lorenzo the watchman, patting his rifle.

"Three?" echoed Graham, looking down at new bodies in the *plaza*. "*Bueno!* The buzzards will adopt you as their patron saint."

A dour smile crept over the marksman's visage. He gave his attention once more to the surroundings. All waited awhile for another foray by the besiegers. But the square and the streets remained deserted.

"There will be no more of that," Pancho judged. "The illegitimates now are holding counsel over behind the houses, beating their thick brains to discover some sensible way to crack this hard nut. It will be a long time before they find it. They have no artillery, and rifle bullets can do nothing against the thick door. So—"

"No, but those bullets can do a good deal against our heads if we grow careless," interrupted Graham.

"Exactly what I was about to say, señor. The sons of goats will now post sharpshooters in those old kennels down below to pick us off one by one. So we must not show ourselves. Otherwise we have not much to worry about for the next few hours, at least. And we had best save our legs until we need to use them. *No es verdad?*"

"Most true. All this running up and down tires us. Say, Hal! Go tell the girls to keep away from the slits. From now on there'll be sniping, and— Well, you understand. I'll be along in a minute. Step on it!"

Woodford sprang to the stairs and was gone.

"There goes a boy," ventured Pancho, "who is becoming a man."

"There goes a man!" corrected Graham. "A man who may have seemed boyish, but a man! Make no mistake on that point!"

Pancho equably accepted the rebuke.

"Pardon, señor. My words were slightly wrong, perhaps. At any rate, I chanced to look into his eyes when we all were casting our little packages of surprise at the accursed descendants of diseased progenitors who—ah—disturbed our meditations. Until then I had thought him to be not merely a boy but a baby. And we all have wondered why such a *caballero* as you dragged with you such a *niño* as he. But now I think we have been a little mistaken."

"I am glad that your eyes are open now," retorted Graham. "I do not pick babies to travel with me. If I did, I would not have picked you."

He turned away, looking out at the mountains. The Mexicans, after absorbing the veiled tribute to their manhood, stood more proudly. Their señor continued his survey of the horizon, outwardly cold, inwardly warm. Never before had Pancho or any of his followers spoken to him of Woodford. And he had known that their silence meant contempt. Now the ice was broken, the tacit disdain was gone and the newcomer was accepted as a fellow fighter. And the heart of the man who had gambled on him was glad.

But of this he gave no sign. Soon he walked to the stairs and down.

"And there," declared Pancho, "goes a real man! Well, now, you wretched imitations of something human, I will take Lorenzo off this post and put Miguel on. You, Lorenzo, got only three men when you might have hit six or nine—"

"I hit several more," defended Lorenzo. "But they got away."

"So you say. At any rate, you are very tired after shooting so marvelously well. So you will go below and rest. Miguel, did you notice that El Señor stood in the middle of this place, where a bullet from below could not hit him? Do the same, and you may live a long time. *Vamonos, muchachos.*"

He shuffled to the steps. Lorenzo, with a thin smile, and Hilario, with a wide grin, followed. When they were gone Miguel looked around, then improved on his instructions. He lay down and lighted a cigaret.

A few feet away lay the sticks of dynamite left over from the bombardment. He carefully kept away from them and, when his smoke was finished, spat on the burning butt. Then, secure, he drowsed awhile.

All around him the deserted village remained silent. At length he sat up, yawned, stretched. The stillness continued unbroken. Lazily he got to his feet and walked about, peeping through the arches, moving quickly aside. No shot sounded. No shape moved. Nothing at all took place. So, completing the circuit, he leaned against a corner, gazed around once more, and ignited another roll of tobacco. The Zinzimeo gang was gone, or asleep, or still talking, or—

The match flew from his fingers. The cigaret jerked upward, cometed in air, fell at random. The overconfident guard sagged forward, vast astonishment on his face. As he flopped on the floor, not to rise again, the crack of a rifle echoed over the silent pueblo.

Only half of his head had been visible or vulnerable while he lolled against the stones. But that half had been twice too much. A sniper had scored.

The butt of the fallen cigaret lay touching the fuse of one of the sticks of dynamite. Its smouldering fire crept slowly, steadily, along the tobacco shreds. Its damp end drew dry in the arid air. Inexorably it shortened, turning to a small streak of black ash, smoking itself to the finish. Now it was half consumed. Now it was but an inch long. Now the creeping coal was but half an inch from the waiting fuse . . .

A gust of wind swept into the tower, swirled about its floor, fluttered the slack shirt of the dead man, flung the smoking stub aside and was gone. The little red coal burned itself out a foot away from its former position. The dynamite lay as before, unfired.

Men might come, go, live, die, ignored by the spirits of El Valle Perdido. But something still protected the defiant old church and its tongueless bells.

CHAPTER XVIII

FROM THE HILLS

THE SINGLE shot aroused no immediate excitement within the fort and presaged no new attack from without. The sharpshooter was not sure that the quickly sinking head had not merely ducked. So he remained hidden and vigilant. And the seven inside the church gave only momentary attention to the lone report or to other occasional snipings which, at long intervals thereafter, punctuated the monotony. The questing bullets flew through window or slit, struck high on opposite walls, fell flattened and futile.

Not until Hilario entered the belfry to take over the watch was the death of Miguel discovered. Thus the place was eyeless for nearly two hours. But in those hours, and in others following, no new assault developed. Whatever deviltry was being schemed by Zinzimeo remained undisclosed.

Pancho swore luridly over the demise of the incautious sentry, but forbore to report it to his señores until late in the day. Hilario, no longer pleasant faced, stood useless watch for a time, then took crafty vengeance. On one of the long sticks which had beaten the bells he artfully manipulated his hat at one side of an arch, meanwhile standing invisible at the other. From a dark doorway below leaped a flash. The sombrero dropped. A retaliating bullet sped at the ambush. Soon the conical headgear rose again, moved tantalizingly, but drew no more shots from that covert.

In the course of the next half hour he angled two more assassins into revealing their positions and struck back with lethal speed. When Lorenzo replaced him he was once more good natured.

"*Tres*," he announced. "My poor sombrero has been much abused, but our score is even. Now see if you can better it. But keep your thick skull hidden."

"Trust me for that," vouchsafed Lorenzo. "Now get out."

Hilario went, his bullet torn hat cocked over one ear, to report to his chief and earn caustic approbation. And in the next two hours the canny Lorenzo bettered his score by two points. When Pancho himself arose to stand watch, the retiring watchman frugally advised:

"Wait a few minutes, *capitán*, while I fetch up one of our old hats. It is sinful to spoil our good new ones at this childish game. I got two of the rats, but my sombrero is not so good as it was."

"You speak sense, *hombre*," agreed Pancho. "Rats can be found anywhere, but not such hats as these. Here, give me yours! A few more holes will not hurt it, and you can find whole ones downstairs. *Vaya!*"

Lorenzo descended, bareheaded. Pancho served his full time, angled cunningly, shot unerringly, but went down somewhat chagrined. He had fired only twice, and thus held low score. Through some oversight of the still invisible Zinzimeo, snipers were becoming hard to find.

Over in the other tower, time dragged. For awhile the two men and the two girls conversed desultorily, sitting at the table, stopping to listen after each shot outside. At length Graham bantered:

"Why don't you girls dress up for us? We've imported new gowns for you, regardless of expense, and we thought we'd find you completely transformed when we came back from that false alarm. But you're still wearing the same old things. Don't the new ones fit?"

"Perfectly, some of them," rejoined Juana. "But there's supposed to be a war on, isn't there?"

"True enough. And somehow folks do fight better in campaign clothes than in parade uniforms. I've noticed that before now. But our little war seems to have punctured all its tires and gone flat. And this waiting for mechanics to jack it up and start it rolling again gets monotonous. So, in the meantime—

"In the meantime the assistants may possibly be on their way," she interposed. "Shall we see?"

He rose swiftly.

"You keep back!" he ordered. "I'll do the looking."

Picking up his binoculars, he ambled away and around the room, peering warily from slits, standing just outside the angle of danger from the low huts. At length he remained motionless, gazing through the lenses.

"What's out there?" demanded Woodford.

"Er—why, there are some hills, and some trees, and some rocks, and a lot of lovely blue sky, and— Say, Hal, I've sort of forgotten things. Who was that old chap who raised up a monster that later destroyed him?"

"Frankenstein."

"That's right. The only name that came to me was Machiavelli, and I knew that was wrong. Not that it matters. I just happened to think of it, and—"

He paused. A soft footstep beside him was followed by a firm handclasp on the glasses. Juana took the tubes from him and gazed afar.

On a distant, almost indiscernible trail was a string of dots, seemingly motionless, yet gradually moving across a bare stretch of hillside, heading from one dark splash of woods into another. They were smaller than the ants of Zinzimeo, progressed more slowly, traveling afoot. But they were descending into the valley.

Until they disappeared into the next covert she watched them. Then she glanced up at the Northerner beside her.

"Do you think we're Frankensteins?" she quietly asked.

"*Quién sabe?*" He shrugged. "Maybe yes, maybe no. We've hammered the bells and called them here, and we can't stop them now. Whether they're monsters or mere mechanics, there will be a bill to pay. However, why worry? It's not due yet."

She stood very still. Then she handed back the glasses and walked to the table. On the board still lay the gold cross which, stolen from her home town, had followed her along devious trails to come at last to her hands. She looked long at it; then picked it up and walked away toward her bedroom. As always, Anita followed her.

Woodford marched to Graham, grasped the binoculars, studied the scene outside without perceiving anything new. The far dots were gone.

"What's all this about?" he probed.

"What's what about? Oh, my little private chat with Juana? Nothing you need worry about, old sleuth. Maybe I just wanted to get her aside for a minute and took that way of doing it. You don't have to know every word I say to her, do you?"

"Oh—er—why, of course not. Excuse me."

"You're excused. Well, I guess the girls have gone to take siesta, and we might as well do the same. There's nothing to keep us awake. And we might have to get up tonight and blow a kiss or a curse at our old college chump, Zinzimeo. So let's snooze while the snoozing is good."

He strolled back to the table, looked a moment at the corridor where the girls had vanished, then lay down and stretched out. Woodford did likewise.

Thereafter, for a long time, all was quiet within and without. It was the siesta period, as Graham had suggested. And in all the pueblo and all the wide bowl round about it, the only creatures which did not pause and rest were diminutive insects which, unseen, crept down through belts of forest, along hidden roads or unsuspected trails or imperceptible ravines, toward the long abandoned church of the charmed bells.

CHAPTER XIX

IN THE DARK

LATE in the day Lorenzo grew slightly reckless. He and Hilario had a bet between them, and he was at the short end of the score. So he exposed himself a trifle too much while trying the hat trick. A shrewd sniper recently posted by Zinzimeo ignored the bait and shot straight.

Pancho, serving supper with his own hands, slid a significant look at Graham, who followed him out. Downstairs the quiet fellow apologized:

"I am sorry, señor, but we men now are only four. Miguel and Lorenzo are in a cool room. What of the night?"

Graham's mouth thinned. After a few seconds he answered:

"Too bad. But it can't be helped. Through the night we shall still be four."

"*Muy bien, señor.* I dislike to disturb your rest. But fresh eyes and ears are better than tired ones."

"True. There is no other news?"

"Nothing, except that the boys shot eight or nine Zinzimeo rats."

"Did they? Good! Well, I'll see you a little later."

They parted. Pancho carried food to Hilario in the belfry, and stayed with him; he did not like the ghostly emptiness below. Graham returned to the table, ate, smoked, talked, affected drowsiness, and soon sent the girls to bed. When they were gone he quietly told Woodford:

"Two of the boys got shot today. We'll stand their watches tonight. Chances are that we'll get action before morning."

"Here's hoping!" responded his partner. "I've been thinking those buzzards might settle down to starve us out. They could do it in a few days."

"Not so soon as you think. Horse meat isn't bad."

The New Yorker looked startled, then thoughtful.

"I forgot the horses," he admitted.

"Naturally. Horse steaks aren't listed on Manhattan menus. But I don't believe we'll need them. Things are sort of drawing to a head, and— Well, I'll go up now for the first night watch. You sleep until you're called."

He strode out, carrying two rifles, wearing heavy belts of cartridges.

Reaching the belfry, he sent the Mexicans down and stood surveying all the terrain. The radiant moonlight disclosed no moving forms. The soft breezes brought no stealthy sounds. The ruined huts belched no flash. Near and far, the scene seemed utterly devoid of life. He eyed dusky masses of trees near the pueblo, speculating on what might be concealed therein, but finding no answer. At length he sat down, back against a wall, and listened.

Except for the squeaks of bats, he heard nothing. In the vigils of the succeeding sentries, too, the quietude remained unbroken until after midnight. The watches now were short, giving each observer one hour on and three off. Woodford, Pancho, Hilario rose in turn, came down with no news to report. Graham again took post, to be relieved, at twelve, by Woodford.

"No change," said Graham, "except overhead. It'll be dark at intervals. Keep your ears wide open."

Broad, thick clouds now were drifting across the sky. Graham had hardly departed when one of them obliterated the moon. The world went black. Soon thereafter Woodford heard mutterings and hissings near the base of the tower.

He leaned over the balcony, stared down, tried to swing his rifle into position, then withdrew it and seized his revolver: stopped that in turn, and wheeled to the few sticks of dynamite.

"I'll scatter you, you snakes!" he whispered. "Yes, I'll spatter you!"

Snapping a pocket flashlight into action, he snatched up the largest explosive, scratched a match, touched the fuse, tossed the destroyer over the verge, braced himself for the shock. None came.

The missile thumped on the ground. Startled oaths broke out. Feet fled. The dynamite remained dumb. Imperfectly ignited, too hastily thrown, it had extinguished its own feeble spark on landing.

Furious, Woodford seized another bomb, then dropped it and leaped up. Leaning out again, he emptied his revolver at random toward the sound of retreat. His reward was a yell of terror and pain. One wild bullet had found a mark.

Then he ducked. An instant later

rifle shots cracked raggedly. Bullets flattened on stones or hissed overhead. Again fell silence.

"Damn that dud!" swore the watcher. "If it had gone off— Oh well, I'll light the next one right."

But there was no next one.

Graham came back upstairs, jocosely asking the reason for the "unseemly disturbance." When he learned it he looked grave.

"Too bad," he said. "I wish we had that stick back inside here. But what's gone is gone. And maybe it's lucky that it died while it went. This place is old, Hal, and getting shaky. It shook pretty badly this morning, while we were heaving our little pebbles well out in the *plaza*, and a stiff shock right beside it might do us more harm than good. Use bullets from now on, and keep your head down while you're using them. Well, so long."

DESCENDING, he took with him the last of the dynamite. Down on the main floor he studied the door, then spoke to Pancho and Hilario, who, aroused by the firing, awaited instructions.

"*Compañeros*, we'll do some moving," he decided. "Everything but the horses goes into the other tower. The animals—"

He paused, uncertain.

"There is a room at the rear which will hold them, señor," Pancho informed him.

"All right. Put them away. Then we'll tote everything else into the dormitory upstairs. *Vamos!*"

A quarter hour of efficient action followed. Then quiet again ruled.

When Woodford came down the nave was bare. But, in the small light of his flash, he did not notice that. After an hour of intense listening, during which nothing new had come about, he had grown sleepy. And, on entering the dormitory, he discerned even less there. Graham was sleeping tranquilly; and the returning sentinel switched off his white ray, divested himself of belts and weapons in the dark, lay down quietly, and slept at once.

More hours passed. Clouds plunged the valley into renewed gloom, went their way, allowed the sinking moon to shine, smeared it out again. At length the western mountains swallowed that bright disc, and blackness was complete.

Then unseen things stirred abroad. Dawn was hardly half an hour away, but the eyes of Pancho, again on watch, were useless. Down at the door sounded a slight rasping noise, resembling the gnawing of a rat. From elsewhere came mysterious sounds so faint that not even the ears of an experienced Mexican outlaw could entirely interpret them.

Stealthy creatures were moving, and one was working at the door with a knife point. That much was evident. But did the brainless progeny of infamous ancestors think they could whittle through wood hard enough to baffle bullets? The sentinel grinned as he contemplated such idiocy. Loosely gripping his rifle, he leaned out, hoping the fool below would stay until dawn brought light enough for a swift shot.

The gnawing continued. At length it ceased. For several seconds stillness held the valley once more. Then the sky paled with the first wan light of a new day. Rapidly the shadows thinned, the plaza became dimly visible, the steps and the door took definite shape. And on those steps a match flared, poised a second, dropped. A dark shape leaped away, ran for the shelter of the nearest corner. Behind it, midway of the door, hung a small glow of swiftly eating fire.

"*Dios mío!*" gasped Pancho, shooting as he spoke.

The fleeing shape pitched headlong and lay still. His killer whirled and ran madly down the stairs. Before he had gone halfway to the nave a shock smote the tower and bellowed among the somnolent mountains.

In the bygone blackness some snaky bandit had crawled noiselessly over the ground, felt about until he found the dynamite, and crept away with it. Later he had come back with a knife, a screw extracted from a rifle stock, a bit of cord, and matches. The point of the knife ate into the dense wood a socket for the screw; its edge turned that screw in far enough to hold firm; the cord hung the explosive from the projection; the match ignited the fuse. And, though the workman died, his work was well done.

The tower swayed sickeningly, creaked, groaned, but held itself still defiantly upright. But the door which had stood for centuries caved inward, its wood smashed, its bars shattered, its hinges torn off. The stone steps beneath it sank and split as if smitten by a gigantic hammer.

With a hollow crash, the remnants of the barrier toppled to the floor. The great doorway gaped at the dawn. And from both sides of the church, where they had ranged themselves against the walls, the wolves of Zinzimeo, yelling in ferocious triumph, came bounding to their kill.

CHAPTER XX

BATTLE

PANCHO, wheeling downward with dizzy speed, reached the bottom of the stairs as the first rush of men surged through the doorway. He halted, sprang back into shadow. In one glance he saw that he could not reach the other tower. The assailants were too fast and furious to give him the ghost of a chance.

Throwing his rifle to his shoulder, he pulled trigger. Only a dull click resulted. In his haste to get down he had neglected to eject the spent shell fired at the dynamiter. Cursing silently, he yanked a fresh cartridge into the barrel. Then he held it unused.

Flashes were leaping from the gloom of the other staircase, to which Hilario had sprinted when the crash shocked him awake. Now he was pouring rapid fire into the invaders. Before his rifle was shot out, two others opened from the steps above him; the guns of Graham and Woodford. For a few seconds a horizontal sleet of death sprayed the mass. Abruptly the charge slowed.

Men in front fell, limp or writhing. Men behind stumbled over them, sprawled, scrambled aside. Men still farther back halted, firing at the flashes; but, jostled by those swarming at their heels, they shot wild. Other bandits, quick of eye and thought, dodged away from both sides of the human stream, leaping toward the dark walls.

The first of these adroit dodgers was a burly figure with one useless arm, carrying a powerful pistol in his good hand, but not yet using it. Watching the hostile doorway, bellowing orders, moving rapidly away from the leaden blast into which he commanded his subordinates to charge, he sidled along toward the belfry stairs. He did not notice those stairs at all. His objective was a side wall, along which he might advance unhurt. But he never reached it.

It all had taken place while Pancho was rectifying his error in marksmanship. Life, death, attack, evasion, were matters of seconds. The hollow church reverberated with shots, shouts, screams, oaths, dominated by the bull-chested roarings of that slinking shape which was sidestepping destruction. In his protective darkness Pancho now grinned like a lurking jaguar. His rifle muzzle centered on the approaching form. As that vociferous rascal was passing the stair entrance the man hidden there called greeting and farewell.

"*Buenos noches,* Señor Zinzimeo! Good night!"

Zinzimeo heard and whirled, pistol rising. But the weapon spat no bullet. While he turned, Pancho expertly blew out his brains.

As the bulky corpse thudded on the flags the killer sprang forth, seized the pistol, looked swiftly about. Then he fell flat and snaked himself back to the steps, while several bullets flew above him. Although his gunshot had gone unnoticed in the general uproar, the spurt of fire had caught quick eyes. Now he had to slide fast to cover, leaving behind the cartridge belt which he had intended to get. Once back in darkness, he emptied Zinzimeo's gun at Zinzimeo's men, striking down four; then threw it at them, grabbed his rifle, and retreated up the stairs.

At the same moment the firing from the other doorway died out. Rifles and revolvers there were exhausted. At once the three defenders ran up their stairway to the arsenal awaiting them above. Bullets hammered the steps as they fled.

Then fell comparative quiet. Wounded men groaned, and one howled. But, for the moment, shooting was suspended. The dawn light, strengthening and pouring through eastern windows, revealed dead and injured men lying in a fan shaped swath, and uninjured bandits, in varying postures, standing all about. Dispersed, confused, scattered from wall to wall, they missed the compelling roar of their leader and instinctively awaited it. Then rang a yell:

"*Cristo!* Zinzimeo is dead!"

A complete hush. Even the wounded held tongues. Then a metallic voice snapped:

"*Bueno!* It is time he died! His luck had turned bad. To hell with him! I, Agustin Mejía, am your commander now! I lead you to victory! The señoritas are ours! The loot here is ours! The blood of these few interlopers is ours! Come on, you! On to gold and love! Follow me! *Viva* Mejía!"

"*Viva* Mejía!" echoed a roaring chorus from men dominated by new leadership. The disintegrated mass once more gathered.

"Go get that assassin, a few of you!" commanded the same voice. "All others, come with me! These few idiots have shot their bolts and fled. Now we have them! Come on! Cut them to pieces!"

"*Vamos!*" clamored the reunited mob. "Blood and love! *Viva* Mejía!"

MEJÍA, the cruel mouthed, shark eyed second in command to the booming Zinzimeo, loped to the stairs. The gang followed with a rush. Only a half dozen dregs of the force gravitated to the foot of the bell tower. And, once there, they looked warily up the black ascent, glanced at one another, and went no farther.

"We can get that fellow at any time," temporized one. "Meanwhile there may be something on Zinzimeo worth finding. Let us look."

"*Ssssi!*" hissed the others. And they flocked around their late leader and went to searching his clothes.

Pancho, some distance above them, unseeing, awaited the attack which he had heard ordered by the penetrating voice of Mejía. And, listening for the stealthy approach of his slayers, he stayed there for some time before again descending.

Meanwhile his señores and his one remaining follower, Hilario, rushed into the old dining room. There stood Juana and Anita, holding rifles.

"Back!" snapped Graham. "Back into your corridor! No, wait! Gather these guns and rush them over to that farther wall! Hurry! Hal! Hilario! Upset this table and drag it over there! Now! Heave!"

He gripped one end of the massive board. His white and brown mates grasped the other. With united effort they hurled it over, hauled it to the farther end of the room, swung it around. It was almost as ponderous as steel, but, endowed with the explosive strength of desperation, they got it into position. Lying on one side, it presented a breast high barricade, impervious to bullets, facing the narrow doorway at the top of the winding stairs. And while the men strained every muscle the girls, unquestioning, gathered armfuls of loaded rifles and ran with them behind the barrier.

"Shut the door!" panted Anita, dropping her first load.

"No!" grated Woodford, still heaving at the table. "This is the showdown! Let them come! Get some more guns! Step out!"

Down below sounded the first yells announcing the accession to power of Mejía. Anita gave him one glance, dashed to obey his order. Juana, too, darted at him a look of approval. Both girls continued their race until Graham barked:

"Back! Under cover! Here they come! Let them have it!"

His revolver hammered as he shouted. Rapid explosions filled the room. At once the others sprang to positions behind the barricade, snatched rifles, and fired at will.

Mejía, leading his men to slaughter of helpless victims, fell riddled. So did others behind him. But the gang came on, forced upward by its own momentum. Inflamed by two leaders, constricted on the staircase, unable to see what waited beyond until too late to turn back, it surged to the doorway with the elemental power of a geyser. Once started, it could not stop itself. The pressure behind each man propelled him into the doorway where he met death.

"*Viva* Mejía!" roared the blind mob below, unaware that Mejía was already a trampled corpse buried under other unwilling sacrifices. "*Viva* Mejía! Gold! Blood! White women! On!"

The rapid shooting above, the inarticulate yells of doomed comrades only incited them the more. They did not yet see who was being shot. So they rose, attempted to back, found themselves borne onward despite themselves and, facing extinction, fired madly at their destroyers even as they fell.

Behind the barricade the three men and the two girls battled gamely. Graham, Hilario and Woodford stood shoulder to shoulder. Anita, instinctively nestling against Woodford, yet temporarily unaware of his proximity, stood on tiptoe to level her rifles, but shot with the surety inculcated by her father. Juana, close beside her, emptied magazines with even more deadly effect. At her feet lay a revolver, reserved for the last emergency. Neither of the señoritas would again become a captive of that merciless gang.

The doorway became half blocked with dead and wounded. The table and the walls beyond it were spattered more and more thickly with spots of lead. The air reeked with powder gas, thickened with smoke. Yet still the foul geyser erupted. And, by sheer force, it overflowed the blockade of human flesh and rolled nearer to the barricade, shrieking, struggling, shooting, falling, but coming uncontrollably on. The defenders, casting aside spent rifles, snatching up full ones, pouring fire and lead into the human tide, still could not stem it. Foot by foot, yard by yard, came annihilation.

Hilario slumped down, lay asprawl. An instant later Graham staggered, loosed two blind shots, slid nerveless to the floor.

WOODFORD glanced to right and left, dropped his latest rifle, drew a revolver with each hand, leaned far forward, and hurled a drumfire into the oncoming assailants. The girls, set mouthed, icy eyed, all color drained from their cheeks, emptied new guns in a last desperate frenzy of fight. Then Juana turned to Anita and dragged her down. Crouching, she gripped the revolver.

Then, just as the wave of destruction swelled to overwhelm the beaten fighters, it faltered, hung suspended, washed back. Another force had smitten it from behind.

Up the stairs welled a clamor of alarm. The lustful shouts changed to yells of sudden fear. Shooting broke out at the bottom of the spiral, racketing up the curved wall. With panicky volume a stentorian voice bawled:

"*Indios! Indios!* At our backs! Turn, *hombres*, turn! *Diablo*, we are trapped! Fight for your lives!"

After an instant of paralysis the shortened flood of banditry reversed itself and sucked back down the hole whence it had erupted. In mad rush it brawled over the heaped dead and roared down the descent, battling for its existence. As it went, Woodford hammered it mercilessly with another pair of revolvers.

Juana, dropping her weapon, swayed against the barrier, suddenly weak. Through pallid lips she whispered:

"*Gracias á Dios!* Thank God! They have come!"

Down below, the shrunken wolf pack fought fearfully but vainly against a horde fiercer than themselves; a horde of short brown Indians, summoned yesterday from their hidden homes by the legendary bells, now implacably determined to exterminate the desecrators of their church.

They had heard that church call repeatedly, and they had come from east and west and south to lurk in the surrounding woods, watch, listen and bide their time. The fate of the unknown men within the sanctuary was nothing to them. But the violent destruction of the door had aroused them to fighting fury, and now they were set on ruthless vengeance. And they took it.

Noiselessly they had gathered from their various coverts and swept into the nave. And there, in compact charge, they had thrown themselves on the backs of the besiegers packed at the tower entrance. Their weapons were crude, ranging from spears and machetes and throwing sticks to antiquated pistols and muzzle loading smooth bores. But on the reddened floor lay numerous rifles and revolvers dropped by brigands killed in the first assault; and these were not overlooked. The storm of ferocious hate which burst on the astounded marauders from the north was deadly as the impact of a thunderbolt.

Penned in their narrow corridor, the survivors of the fight above struggled insanely against their doom. Firing, stabbing, swinging machetes and clubbed rifles, they surged forward willy-nilly, expelled from the archway by the weight of their mad mates behind. The brown tigers from the hills fell fast, but the yellow wolves died faster. The sun, now peering in through the high windows, beheld the fiercest combat ever waged in this ancient pueblo. The wolves could not go back if they would; for, at the top of the stairs, Woodford, with fixed grin, was steadily slaying the hindmost. The little tigers would not go back if they could. They fell where they stood, giving not an inch of ground; and those still standing killed and killed and killed.

Pancho, drawn back down the *campanario* by the new uproar, shot three of the men who had been ordered to get him, but who now crouched in stupefaction around the body of Zinzimeo. Their fellow ghouls started up, attempted flight to the door, but were blocked and butchered by quick eyed Indians. Those same Indians then turned toward the belfry stairs, but hesitated, peering into the gloom. The slayer of their enemies ought not to be their own enemy; they could not yet see him . . .

"*Bienvenido, amigos!*" called Pancho. "Welcome, friends! *Vaya!* Get on to the fight! Quick!"

Thus prompted at the moment of indecision, eager to hurl themselves into the growing battle beyond, they muttered to one another and ran to the combat. The Mexican surveyed the whole scene and remained where he was. He could not yet reach his señores and señoritas. And he knew well that the blood maddened *Indios* were likely to turn on him when other victims failed.

Up in the other tower, Juana realized the same probability. She and Graham had foreseen it, and she had prepared a frail defense against it, hours ago. And now she put her plan into effect.

For a moment she hesitated, looking at Graham, in whose hair showed a large red stain. Then she crept to him, examined the wound, and leaped up, once more buoyant.

"Come, Anita!" she commanded. "We must move fast! Up!"

Anita, lying exhausted on the floor, gamely rallied. Up she got, glancing at the two supine men, seeking a third. The third was gone. Her eyes flashed to the doorway, widened.

"Oh, Juana!" she moaned.

Then she dashed around the end of the barrier, ran across bodies, seized the shoulders of a shape which came creeping over the pile of flesh at the opening. Juana, after one look, followed fast. Together they dragged into the room the collapsing body of Woodford.

Somebody on the stairs had turned on him and fired with vindictive surety. Now, white faced and red mouthed, he was crawling back to shelter. The bandit who had shot him was dead, slain as the slayer himself fell. But, with two bullets in his body, Woodford was not feeling well.

"Thanks, girls," he mumbled, with a wan grin. "I'm—a little—tired. But that's all right. It's been—a good party. Now get back—behind the table—and give me another gun. I'll—hold—them—"

He coughed, sagged, lay senseless.

The sisters looked at him and at each other. Juana's eyes blazed. Anita's, sick with shock, stared, then kindled and flamed in response. Again the pair grasped their last defender, and with united effort they hauled him into their own dim corridor. There Juana said swiftly:

"Courage, *chiquita!* Stay with him. I have something else to do."

Then she ran to their bedroom.

The tumult of fight was fast dying. Below stairs, the last of the yellow wolves were meeting oblivion. None escaped. The brown tigers, although decimated, slew their foes unerringly as they came. Within a couple of minutes the riot subsided to virtual silence.

For several more minutes the quiet persisted, broken only by brief yelps. The victors now were finding wounded antagonists and stabbing their hearts. When the mopping up was completed they swarmed together again. A harsh voice gave command. Callously trampling corpses, the descendants of the Aztecs grimly mounted the stairs, seeking whatever else they might slay and mutilate.

Into the long refectory they rushed. Then, with startled exclamations, they slowed, bore back against their followers, stopped.

In the big room they saw only one upright figure. Corpses carpeted the floor, the air reeked with gunpowder, but no combatant offered further battle. Instead, their bulging eyes beheld a motionless white woman in a long white gown, standing in a shaft of sunlight, regarding them with tranquil gaze. At her breast she held a shining gold cross.

CHAPTER XXI

THE MIRACLE

MEXICAN history records the miraculous appearance of a holy virgin, four centuries ago, to an aged Indian on his way to church; and, by somewhat devious reasoning, traces the eventual achievement of Mexican independence back to this phenomenon. The shrine of the Virgin of Guadalupe, erected on the spot of the celestial visitation, has long been the Mecca of the devout, and especially of fanatical Indians. And by millions who never have made the pilgrimage the tradition is known and implicitly believed.

Now the dour Indians of the mountains surrounding El Valle Perdido, beholding in their own ancient church a veritable virgin holding the cross, stood stupefied with awe. They knew nothing of the coming of two señoritas to this valley. They had expected to find in this room only a small knot of gunmen with backs to the wall. The vision of the beautiful white woman standing in serene purity beyond the litter of slain malefactors was so amazing, so utterly unexplainable, that it seemed supernatural.

Speechless, motionless, they gaped at her. Steadily she regarded them in turn, holding her cross immobile in the sun. So tense was the silence that when at length one Indian found voice his low mutter sounded louder than all the bygone battle roar.

"*Santa!*" he breathed. "A saint!"

A whisper of assent spread over the staring crowd. In the front rank a bloodstained warrior sank worshipfully to his knees. Several others followed his example. Then the saint smiled and spoke.

"Stand!" she bade, her tone calmly controlled. "There is work to be done."

The kneelers obediently arose. With the same stately manner she went on:

"My blessing is upon you, my sons, for your faith and works. And you shall have your reward.

"You have heard the silenced bells call. You have come and destroyed the beasts who profaned this holy spot. And now I promise you that the prophecy of the old *padres* shall be fulfilled. The lost mine shall be found. This valley shall once more be populated. This church shall be your own again. Protect it at all times!"

She paused. No voice answered. Dumbly devoted, they awaited further revelations.

"The mine will be found by a good man who will soon be here," she predicted. "A white man from a far place. Follow him, obey him in all things, and you shall prosper.

"Now go and clean this church of its defilement. Begin at the outer door, where these misguided creatures began their impious attack. Go at once. And upon you, my loyal people, be peace!"

She smiled, lifted high the cross. And, without a word, the reverent aborigines backed away.

Down the stairs they retreated, still dazed by the wonder of it all. And, as the vision had commanded, they went straight to the shattered door and commenced their work there. So they passed Pancho, now standing in the corner nearest the dormitory stairs, without seeing him. When all had gone by he flitted from his temporary covert and vanished up the spiral. If any Indian belatedly remembered that some man had shot and spoken from the *campanario*, search for him was far too tardy.

At the top, the Mexican gazed appreciatively at the devastation strewn around and ahead. The virgin who had maneuvered the brown fanatics into temporary withdrawal was not now in sight.

"*Diablo!*" he muttered. "What a fight! And where was I?"

The same question came quickly back at him as he advanced. From behind the table rose the pale face of the vanished virgin, who, after one glance, coldly inquired:

"Oh, it is you, Pancho? Where have you been all this time?"

"In a dark hole," admitted Pancho, shamefaced. Then, more assertive, "But I shot a few—including one Zinzimeo."

Her chilly eyes thawed.

"You killed Zinzimeo?"

"He walked to the end of my gun," he explained, with assumed modesty. "And I grew so nervous that my finger twitched. Accidents will happen."

He now had reached the barricade. Impulsively she reached over it, seizing his somewhat bashful hand and giving it a mannish grip.

"Your pardon, Pancho," she said. "I should have known that you were doing something. But I am a little nervous myself. We have been busy here—"

"So I see, señorita."

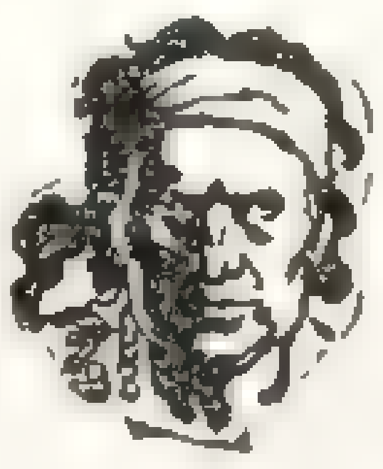
"And we still are. Come, now, lend a hand! The Indians will soon come back."

He looked over the barrier, scowled, muttered an oath, then hurried to assist. Anita was there, stooping, silently exerting all her strength in an effort to drag away the burly Hilario. Juana had been hauling at Graham. Both men still were unconscious.

"To where?" he succinctly inquired, clutching the collar of each limp body with powerful fist. "Lead the way!"

"Follow me! Come, Anita!"

The girls fled. The outlaw followed closely, towing a sixth of a ton of inert bone and muscle without apparent strain. Into the private corridor he pulled his señor and his subordinate. And there, after further instructions from Juana and a moment of hesitation, he left them all.



WHEN the Indians reappeared, methodically clearing the floors and the stairs, they found no saint awaiting them. Instead they saw a Mexican lolling against the upset table with arms folded and no weapons in sight, though with several revolvers nestling under his belt at the small of the back.

"Who are you?" demanded the chief of the salvagers.

"A humble servitor of the Virgin of El Valle Perdido," solemnly replied the

Mexican. "Do not delay. Obey her will."

They gazed around in superstitious dread, half fearing, half hoping to see again the heavenly shape. It did not reappear. Miracles must not repeat themselves, or they cease to be miracles; and well the vanished virgin knew it. Some of the less devout warriors, emboldened now by their manhandling and plundering of the bodies downstairs, looked narrowly at the soft toned but crafty eyed stranger who acted as her mouthpiece. He did not look to be the chosen messenger of a celestial spirit. He was not even the promised white man. Instead, he more closely resembled the bandits under their feet.

"Do not delay," repeated Pancho, with a shade more of authority. "You have received the blessing of the virgin for your loyalty. If you grow disloyal the blessing may be withdrawn. Remove this pollution at once, as she commanded you!"

Thus spurred, they suspended embryonic thought and fell to work again. Once at it, they toiled fast, clearing away the mortal débris in growing haste to be gone from the somewhat ominous room. Only their leader had the temerity to advance and glance behind the table, assuring himself that no refugee hid there. Finding the space blank, he returned to his men and speeded them out.

"It is the will of the virgin," instructed Pancho, as the last of the bandits was hauled downstairs, "that you all go to your homes and wait there until the bells speak again. Then return here and obey whatever orders may be given you by a man who is yet to come. He will be a tall white man with gray eyes. That is all. Now go!"

They went without demur, eager enough now to bear home the spoils of their foray and the marvelous tale of the miracle. Their loot was, to their primitive minds, rich: a staggering load of modern guns and cartridges, a hundred horses, all the packs of plunder found with those animals, even the clothing of the men they had slain. Their story, when they reached their fastnesses in the mountain nooks, was even more opulent.

By that time the virgin had become a radiant spirit whose golden effulgence had filled the whole church, and whose voice had been like music of a great organ. She had blinded the eyes of the bandit infidels, who, driven by the devil, had shot hundreds of bullets at her without harm. She had had no human defenders until the Indians came and, fired with holy zeal, exterminated her assailants. The narrators found it easy to forget the slaughter wrought by unseen riflemen before their arrival and to take all credit to themselves. Yes, the virgin had been entirely alone. And she alone had caused the bells to speak. And the prefatory blasts of dynamite had been thunders of *Dios* presaging the portent. And so on, and so on. Fervid imaginations supplied numberless fancies which straightway became irrefutable facts.

Meanwhile the virgin herself, and her unseen sister virgin, and the outlaw who was their incongruous servitor, all turned to work of resuscitation. Graham and Hilario, struck down by bullets which had grazed their skulls, were revived by plentiful use of water, but lay for some hours thereafter recuperating from concussion. Woodford's wounds were more grave.

"Señoritas," said Pancho, after critical examination, "he is in the hands of God. We can do nothing but bandage him and, perhaps, encourage him to live."

He looked at Anita, whose anxiety was plainly evident.

"Sometimes," he added softly, "a virgin can work a miracle in the body and soul of a man by only laying on him her hands and gazing into his eyes. I have known such a thing to come about. At any rate, there is no other help for him here."

With that he withdrew to investigate conditions below stairs. He found the nave bare, the hidden horses undisturbed, the plaza and the pueblo deserted. And for the rest of the day he occupied himself as cook, waiter, hostler, watchman and occasional visitor to the wounded.

Late in the day Graham and Hilario arose, wincing from headaches, but steady. They looked long at Woodford, who lay hardly conscious, breathing with difficulty. Hilario shook his head, scowled with renewed pain, and walked out. Graham gazed at Anita, who steadfastly watched the sufferer. Then, followed by Juana, he went to the large room in which all had made their last stand.

There, leaning on the bullet pocked table, they talked low. She told him of everything since his downfall, trying to speak lightly, but, by tired tone and restless little movements, betraying extreme fatigue and frayed nerves. At the end she drooped against the board. Wordless, he passed an arm around her and drew her down. They sat on the tiles, her head on his shoulder, her eyes closed, her whole body relaxed in his gentle clasp. He stared soberly at the wall, thinking.

At length he stirred. She drew a long breath, straightened, looked at him with heightened color, but did not rise.

"I'm going to take a ride," he quietly announced.

"To where?"

"To that town of yours, Jacuariago. Hal needs a surgeon."

"But—you don't know the road, do you?"

"I can find it. I know where Zinzimeo's men came down the mountains, and I can follow their trail to the road, and so on back. And I'm going tonight, while the going is good. Tonight the way will be clear. The Indians will be telling their tale at home. But by tomorrow some of those who hear the story will be sneaking down here, hoping for further marvels. They won't dare to come in, but they're likely to camp around here for days on end, hiding and spying. And if they saw a horseman riding away they might plug him in the back, thinking he was a bandit survivor. So I'll go tonight, alone."

"But you're in no condition for a long ride! Send Pancho!"

"I thought of that, but it won't do. He looks too much the Mexican bandit to be welcome in Jacuariago after what Zinzimeo just did there. If not shot at sight he'd probably be jailed, and days might pass before—"

"I can give him a note."

"And they'd think you'd written it under compulsion, and that it was just a bandit trick. No, it takes a white señor to get quick action for Hal, and I'm that señor. But the idea of the note is good. Give me a letter to your dad. If he's come home I'll see him. If not I'll show it to whatever authorities still exist there. Come! Write it now! Up we get!"

He arose, filled with new vigor, drawing her with him. Somehow, while he sat so close to her, his headache had completely died out. Somehow she, too, had lost her fatigue. And somehow, as they stood together, they came face to face and lip to lip. For a long moment thereafter the ancient room was utterly soundless and totally forgotten.

Then she drew back, fingers across her mouth, deep blue eyes blazing into flaming gray. In the blue ones was a great question, in the gray ones swift answer which became vocal.

"And I'm going to bring back not only a doctor, Juana, but a priest!"

The blue eyes smiled. The intervening fingers sank. Vivid lips again rose.

"Yes, Doug," she breathed. "Do! And now, before you go—"

Once more all was quiet.

CHAPTER XXII

FROM THE NORTH

IN THE silence of moonlit night the hoofs of a single horse beat hollow tattoo on old cobbles, receded northward, died out. Thereafter the pueblo was still for many hours.

Not long after the rider had gone, two dark figures emerged from the shattered church door, carrying two others. In the tumbledown cemetery behind the town they worked an hour or two at digging and filling two graves. Then they returned inside, leaving Miguel and Lorenzo to their last rest. And for days and nights thereafter no other human shape left the edifice.

Just inside the threshold, Pancho and Hilario kept alternating watch, unseen but all-seeing. Throughout the following day they detected nothing whatsoever. But in the ensuing moonlight Pancho saw several stocky figures approach across the *plaza.* They bore no weapons, came on with increasing hesitance, sank at last to their knees. When they backed away from the steps they left clay platters of crude but nourishing food.

"Bless you, my children!" sepulchrally spoke the sentinel.

The retreating figures halted, bowed awkwardly, then scuttled to shelter. The outlaw waited for a cloud to float across the moon before he stepped out and gathered up the donations. Awe and mystery were, he knew, the best defense against intrusion. So he and all others within the walls remained invisible to the watchers who, as Graham had foreseen, had come from the mountains.

Each night thereafter a votive offering of food was thus brought, and the bringers received their blessing with a scared thrill and fled exalted. To their primitive minds there was nothing incongruous in offering food to a heavenly spirit; moreover, it was all they had to give, and its gracious acceptance rejoiced their simple souls. The fact that their benediction came in masculine tones aroused no skepticism. Having been told by the warriors that no live man remained here, they could ascribe the male voice to some ghostly *padre* who now had risen from a forgotten grave to guard the sacred building, and thus could carry home a supernatural tale of their own.

Meanwhile the humble contributions aided materially in eking out the supplies of the immured five. And four of the five, despite long vigils, grew stronger and calmer in the unbroken peace following war. Hilario's head healed fast. Pancho found himself restive with surplus energy. The señoritas became more buoyant in mind, more vital in spirit; and, by some subtle transference, their vitality flowed into the supine man on whose damp brow they often rested their hands. Cool, soothing, encouraging, the slender white palms subdued fever, quieted occasional delirium, strengthened subconscious will to survive. As the sagacious Pancho had said, there was a miraculous power in the encouraging contact and gaze of a woman.

At times Woodford smiled wanly up at Anita or Juana, tried to talk cheerily, then, obedient to gentle command, sank into a drowse. At other times he stared at nothing and fought malign influences far away.

"No, damn you all!" he once shouted, attempting to struggle up. "I'll marry a girl I want or none! And unless I find a better one than you've found yet there'll be none! Society? Take your degenerate society and go to—"

"Lie down, Hal, lie down," soothed Juana, firmly pressing him back. "It's all right. You needn't marry any one. Find your own girl in your own way. Somewhere she's waiting . . . Lie down and sleep awhile and perhaps you will dream of her."

Thus pacified, he did lie and sleep and dream as bidden. But later, in the watch of Anita, he stared again upward, muttering:

"The tarpon fights to the end. The moose and the boar—they were fighters, too. These fellows all around—they're men, fighting their ways in life. And I'm a worm, a miserable crawling thing crushed under heel, without backbone enough to stand up and fight. Oh, God Almighty, isn't there some place in this world where I can be a man?"

His mumble rose to an anguished cry which rang loud in the bare room. The memory of his terrific fight against overwhelming odds and his single handed pursuit of snarling human wolves was entirely gone. His mind was back in New York, living again the misery of embittered years, unaware of the facts that he now was in the place for which he had prayed and that there he had proved himself the man he had felt himself to be.

Anita stared, then laid a hand on his head and slipped an arm under his neck.

"You *are* a man!" she asserted, impulsively. "You are *my* man! And I am your woman! Live, Hal! Live for me! You must! Now rest, my man, rest. You are tired—you must rest—go to sleep . . ."

He slept. But for a long time thereafter she sat with hand still on his brow, arm under his neck, eyes on his haggard face. She held him to life and grew in self-surety by so doing. Hitherto babied by father and sister, the shy girl who, in extremity, had suddenly fought like a man was now rapidly becoming a complete woman.

SO PASSED days and nights. Diffident Indians stole to the steps, Mexicans watched them, white girls nursed a white man, and that white man, despite all care, gradually sank nearer to death. Skilled surgery and medicine were his ultimate salvations, and neither of these was yet available. With increasing concern Pancho and Hilario climbed the *campanario*, and the señoritas alternately gazed northward from their own tower. But the mountains remained lifeless.

Then, near noon of an unusually hot day, a short but rapid procession streaked down a dun hillside. It descended by zigzags, straightened out across the valley floor, spurred into a tired gallop. Up in the belfry Hilario gazed, then ran hard to the nave, laughing joyously. In coverts just outside the pueblo far sighted Indians watched intently, fingered weapons, but, as the riders drew near, lowered them and crept away unseen.

The cavalcade was led by a broad shouldered white man with gray eyes. Immediately behind him, in full robes, galloped a *padre*. The prophecy of the Virgin of El Valle Perdido had come true.

Close on the heels of these two rode another white man—long, lean, gray haired, grim jawed, blue eyed, surveying everything with the keen gaze of long experience. Behind him was a squatty rider, outwardly unarmed, followed by a score of Mexicans with rifles in hands and eyes eager for trouble. They found none.

The expedition clattered into the town. The four leaders swung off their horses. The gray eyed guide, the blue eyed oldster, the *padre*, the stout fellow, all went quickly inside. The last carried a black bag which might, perhaps, contain surgical tools and anaesthetics. The riflemen, with military efficiency, surrounded the church and stood guard.

Inside the walls Juana and Anita ran to the elderly man whose eyes matched their own. He gathered both into a mighty embrace.

"Hello, you gadabouts!" he greeted. "How are you making out?"

"Fine, daddy!" responded Juana. "Oh, I'm so glad to see you! But there's a sick man upstairs, and— Did you bring a doctor?"

"We did," broke in Graham. "How's Hal?"

"He's dying!" cried Anita, breaking from her father's arms. "Come! Come! Every minute counts!"

She fled. All followed fast. Up the tower stairs they ran, and so they were gone.

Pancho and Hilario, who had stood silent and bareheaded in the presence of the priest, donned their sombreros again. And the former said to the latter:

"*Bueno!* Now the sick señor will live. And now that we have no more to do, we shall borrow some cigarets from the soldiers outside."

And, as usual, he was a true prophet.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE VALE OF PEACE

THAT night the brown folk deserted their secret camps in the near woods and betook themselves homeward to announce the advent of the gray eyed man. And thereafter, although many an eye often gazed down at the pueblo from the far mountainsides, the aborigines scrupulously obeyed the virgin's command to remain aloof until summoned.

Weeks passed before the solemn tones of the bells again rolled abroad. Meanwhile the town showed preliminary signs of rebirth. The troopers, who were semi-military mine guards from one of the Raymond properties at the north, constructed thatch roofs on some of the old adobes, cleaned *plaza* and streets, and patrolled the whole place in regular watches. Some of them, led by the *padre*, also searched the church, discovering more than one secret nook and vault in which lay moldering relics. Most of the stuff now was mere rubbish; but among articles still useful were found the long lost tongues of the bells.

Unhurt by time, the ponderous clappers were laboriously borne aloft and, after ladders had been constructed, were hoisted and reseated in place. The bells, too, were cleaned and greased and given short temporary ropes. But the restorers refrained from testing their swing and sound. The time for the ringing was not yet.

Inside the middle tower, the man whom the riders had come to save hovered awhile longer on the verge of the great gulf of eternal sleep, then crept up from it with increasing vigor. Efficient surgery, powerful medicines, unflagging care and encouragement by his comrade and his nurses, overcame the havoc of wounds and fever. At length, on a night when the moon again was big and bright, he was once more on his legs and taking steps into a new life. He was becoming a bridegroom.

It was a double ceremony and, in some ways, a strange one. It took place in the despoiled nave, with the moon and a few flickering candles as the only lights, with no parade or music or bells, with a gang of gunmen as the audience. It was performed by a Catholic priest, but its wording accorded with the Protestant formula. There were no licenses or other legal papers. Yet they were true marriages, and auguries of the future of the hitherto lost valley.

Graham and Juana, who had awaited the recovery of the sick man, became united first; then Woodford and Anita. Raymond, who had talked long with his girls and shrewdly estimated his prospective sons, stood hard lipped but soft eyed. The northern mine guards and the pair of eastern outlaws, all casual toward life and death but all innately susceptible to love, watched with keen appreciation. And far overhead the bats sailed on silent wings, looking curiously down, twittering with wonder, unaware that this was but the first of many ceremonies which thenceforth would be solemnized in the revivified ruin.

"I'm not Catholic, *padre*," Graham had bluntly told the priest, "nor any other kind of churchman. At the same time, I'm no bigot. And a church, whether it's Catholic or Protestant or Mohammedan or Buddhist or what not, is a mighty power for good when it's properly conducted. Now this valley is going to boom again, and this church is the only one there is, and the brown folks around here think a good deal of it. So I want to see it prosper, for their sakes and ours. And after looking you over I think you're the man for the job. There will be no more of the high handed oppression that has caused this recent anti-religious upheaval all over Mexico. But neither will there be any hanging and shooting of the clergy in this valley. We'll stand by you as long as you stand by us. Run things right, and you're the Pope of El Valle Perdido. Otherwise, take a ride for your health."

"Agreed," smiled the *padre*. "As for your being a churchman, perhaps you are a better one than many who make loud protestations of piety but who secretly do much wickedness. And as for bringing peace and prosperity to this church and its people, I will do what I can. Can any man do more?"

"Right!" responded Graham. "Shake!"

Hands gripped. And thus the Lost Valley received its new spiritual director, who still reigns.

IN THE meantime Graham and Raymond, escorted only by Pancho and Hilario, had ridden up to the concealed mine entrance, carrying guns and spades; dug into the latest landslide, and gazed at the blocks of pure silver. When they came out of the tunnel the elderly blue eyes, hitherto somewhat skeptical, were ablaze. In the shadows of the adjacent forest ensued a brief business conference.

"You've got the goods," admitted Raymond. "How about coming into my company? We're strong down here. And my men can move all this to Jacuariago, start up new operations here, and—"

"Nothing doing!" refused Graham. "I know your company. You're backed by Stone and Skinner, of New York. I visited them only a few weeks ago. And now they can't touch one peso of my silver with a ten thousand mile pole. This outfit consists of Graham, Woodford & Company, and it remains independent. And the company behind it is a hard gang that will be here at the touch of a bell, ready and able to blow hell out of any crowd that tries to block the game. Stone and Skinner are out! But Raymond might get in as a silent partner. And in view of the facts that Raymond is going to be the father-in-law of Graham and Woodford, whether he likes it or not, and that he could be quite useful in many ways, and could incidentally fatten his own bank account by so doing— Well, there are the words. Compose your own music."

A thin grin split the leathery countenance of the veteran manager.

"Offhand, I'd say that you play a damn' good game of poker, son," he chuckled. "Also, that you hold all the cards. So you win. Let's go."

With few further words, they went.

On the morning after the double nuptials, the bells rang with new resonance and redoubled volume. Swinging ponderously as of yore, smitten by their own tongues, they threw across silent miles a bidding far more sonorous and authoritative than when inexpertly pounded by stones on sticks. And from all the seemingly barren hills descended columns of brown men, heavily weaponed, to mass in the *plaza* and hear new words of command.

Assembled, they formed an army before which all wise bandits outside would take to cover. And, after listening to the words of the *padre* and the prophesied gray eyed man, they became a treasure train.

Fast runners streaked homeward to round up beasts of burden and herd them to the pueblo. When they returned, their stocky brethren loaded the carriers with silver blocks taken from a high hole to which the priest and the worshipful señor ceremoniously led them. Then, headed by Graham, Raymond and the guardsmen, and followed by many swart Indians bristling with rifles, the long column of donkeys crawled northward.

Out of the town they passed, and up along the steep slopes which had brought a pack of wolves to their deaths and two forlorn captives to new lives. And up in the belfry the pair of brides stood with Woodford and Pancho and Hilario, watching them go. When at length the serpentine line faded from sight they looked down at Indian workmen who, directed by their new *padre*, were demolishing the crumbly ruins in preparation for the erection of solid habitations.

"Our own little valley of dreams," happily sighed Anita, nestling against her husband. "I'll never want to leave it. Will you, Juana?"

Juana smiled, but made no reply. Her deep eyes again looked northward, where her own man had disappeared beyond the horizon. Even now, with the mine hardly open, Graham was not content to remain within the confines of his valley while other men did his work. He must fare forth, restless, adventurous, gambling with whatever chance might be met outside. And, if it were not for the fact that the Indians must not yet be allowed to see their ethereal virgin in mere mortal flesh, she would be with him, riding shoulder to shoulder, knee to knee. So she foresaw the time—years away, perhaps—when all four of them would go over the hills to a wider world.

But in the meantime the vale of peace and happiness was a very pleasant place.

CHAPTER XXIV

REBIRTH

THE LOST VALLEY, no longer lost, is itself again, and more prosperous than ever.

The rediscovered mine, drained by the engineering skill of Señor Raymond of Jacuariago, and worked by industrious brown gnomes, is one of the richest producers in all Mexico. The old road is open, and at its head stand mine buildings much more efficiently equipped than anything known to the old Spaniards. And at its lower end is a clean, green modern town inhabited by a peaceable, yet warlike, population, whose fighting prowess keeps all outsiders far outside. After a few disastrous experiments, priest hunting federals and reckless rebels and raiding bandits all have decided to leave it alone.

Above this town soars the church of La Santísima Virgen, the Most Holy Virgin; dominant as ever, yet much less arrogant than in the years long gone. It has new windows, new doors, new pews, new spirit; a gentler spirit, comforting its worshipers, gracefully accepting willing tribute, but demanding none. Wisely directed, it is, as a certain gray eyed señor foresaw, a great power for good.

Across the *plaza*, fronting the church, stand four spacious bungalows, constructed in Spanish mission style, each surrounded by flower gardens and luxuriant shade trees. In two of these dwell Mexicans named Pancho and Hilario, the trusted lieutenants of the two white captains of local industry. Each now has a comely Mexican housekeeper whom he managed to find somewhere outside, and all are exceedingly comfortable.

In the other two modern houses live the wealthy owners of the mine, with their wives. The señora of the gray eyed señor bears a noticeable resemblance to the Most Holy Virgin and, because of this coincidence and her own gracious personality, is regarded with reverence by all the populace. There is some mystery as to just how she came there, but, since she is the wife of the benefactor foretold by the miraculous apparition, no questions are asked. And all the Indians know that she could not possibly be the sacred spirit once seen in the tower. She is a señora most beautiful and adorable, but mortal. She laughs, she dances, she rides a horse, she sometimes goes hunting with her husband and shoots like a man. The majestic Santísima Virgen, transcendently celestial, would never do such things, nor even linger on earth. So there can be no real kinship between the two.

There is some small perplexity, too, as to where the other señor and his señora came from. Nobody saw them come, but, both at once, they were there. When the chief of all the Indians once made bold to quiz the kindly *padre* on that point, the latter grew slightly stern.

"The ways of God are not for you to question, my son," he rebuked. "The new señor and his señora bring all the more happiness to this valley. That is enough."

And the abashed questioner thereafter held his tongue.

In the bungalow of that later señor hangs a decoration which might seem incongruous. It is a huge tarpon, caught off Tampico, cunningly mounted by an American taxidermist, brought hundreds of miles into the dry highlands to grace a wall of a man who often regards it with reminiscent gaze, sometimes faintly bitter, but usually triumphant. Often the Señor Graham, too, coming over for a fraternal smoke-talk, glances at it, then at his square jawed, self-reliant partner. Nothing is said. But gray and brown eyes speak, lips smile tightly and, while the sisters converse, the men see other things in the drifting vapor of their cigars.

Somewhere up in the home of the Woodfords of Westchester, New York, United

States, lies a concise letter which has never been answered. It reads:

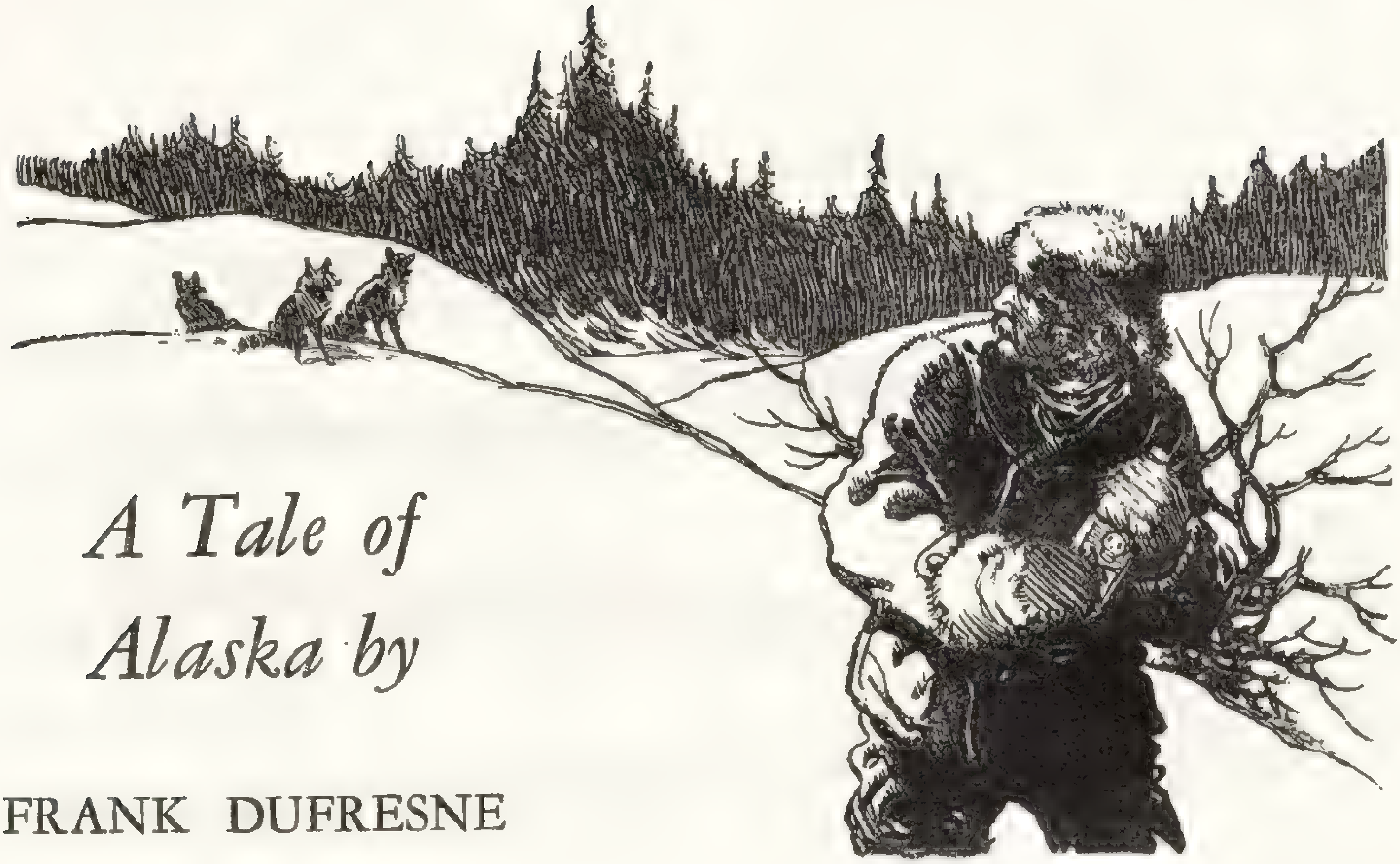
> Valle Perdido, Mexico
> (Via Jacuariago, Estado Michoalisco)
>
> Dear Father and Mother:
>
> Thinking that you may be concerned about my disappearance, I send this to inform you that I am alive—for the first time in my life.
>
> I am in Mexico. I am working in a mine. I am married to a local girl. And that's all there is to say.
>
> If you care to answer I shall be glad to hear from you all. Otherwise, adios!
>
> —HAL

As aforesaid, that note has never been answered. And, as earlier aforesaid, the name of Harold Woodford must not be mentioned in the Woodford domicile. He is a skeleton in the closet, anathematized by parents and all other socially climbing relatives. By his own confession, he is a laborer in a Mexican mine, a frowzy creature swinging a pick alongside greasy nondescripts; and, worse yet, married to a still more frowzy, greasy female of the same unutterable species; and, worst of all, so shameless that he actually wrote home to boast of his total degradation.

If the whole truth were known to those who ignored his tentative proffer and ragingly consigned him to everlasting oblivion, their attitude might be far different. Indeed, the senior Woodfords probably would try to move heaven and earth and portions of hell, including Mexico, to drag their errant son and his wife and fortune into the circles where they would be appreciated; or, in other words, where they could advance the aspirations of the family. But that family will never know.

As ever, the lost valley holds its secrets well.

THE END



A Tale of Alaska by

FRANK DUFRESNE

The POISONER

THE prosecuting attorney of the Fifth Division of Alaska held up a small bottle to the gaze of the jury. The bottle was partially filled with whitish crystals, and on it was pasted a skull and crossbones label on which was printed—

STRYCHNINE—POISON

After the twelve men had examined this potent bit of evidence the prosecutor confronted the crippled man who sat in the prisoner's chair.

"Crane, this is the same bottle found in your cabin by the deputy marshal, isn't it?"

"I reckon so."

"Is it yours?"

"I reckon it is."

"Does it contain poison?"

"That's what the label says."

The prosecutor paused dramatically. His thick red face swelled ominously. To see him blazing wrathfully at the crippled man before him, one would be unlikely to believe that these two men were joint owners of a nearby mining claim. There was no hint of friendship in Hollis, the attorney, as he hurled the accusation at Crane.

"This is the stuff you used to kill the foxes found in your cabin at the time of your arrest?"

"Don't reckon it is."

"How did you kill them?"

"Might've shot 'em."

"Shot 'em, eh?" The prosecuting attorney lashed back with the words as though he would drive them down the prisoner's throat. "Shot 'em, did you? Will you kindly point out to the court and the members of this jury where you hit them? Show them the bullet holes."

The crippled man made a pretense of examining the silver and cross foxes piled in a soft heap on the floor in front of him.

There was not the slightest blemish on any of the pelts, fur side or flesh side.

"Can't seem to find no holes," he admitted at last.

"No. Of course you can't find them—because they're not there. Crane, admit to this jury that you are an outlaw and a poisoner. You know that not one furbearer in ten killed by the use of poison is ever found; that they wander off in the snow and are lost. That's why the game laws put a maximum fine of five hundred dollars and six months' imprisonment on the man who uses the stuff. For a few lousy pelts you destroy the wealth of a big section. You are the most contemptible of all game law violators."

The red faced attorney stopped to mop his brow, having worked himself up to the sweating stage of righteous temper. He swung around to the jury, a dozen grizzled, mackinaw coated trappers, dog mushers and wood cutters.

"Gentlemen, I'm going to ask you to return a verdict of guilty against this prisoner. Don't let the fact that he is a cripple, or that he has been a mining partner with me, interfere with your plain duty as American citizens. Find him guilty—a separate count for each and every fur found in his possession. We'll make an example of this case, and give him the limit."

The limit for eight foxes, each listed as a separate offense, amounted to four thousand dollars' fine and four years' imprisonment. The jury listened in cold astonishment at this unwonted vehemence on the part of the prosecutor. Among the trapping fraternity, poisoning furbearers was frowned upon as a serious violation; but for an officer of the court to demand such extreme penalty seemed grossly unfair. Mutterings of disapproval came from the jury. One old-timer, standing in the audience ringed around the walls of the log cabin courthouse, broke out angrily.

"Come, come, Hollis. That's too much. Why don't you try to hang the man?"

Hollis turned on the intruder furiously.

"I'll handle the prosecution of this case. One more word from you, or from any one else not concerned in the matter, and I'll have you arrested for contempt of court. Crane deserves what he is getting. Not one whit of evidence has he offered to show why the jury should not find him guilty, or why Judge Howard should not pronounce extreme penalty upon him."

Old Judge Howard, sitting calmly behind a rough spruce table, seemed to take an interest at this point. He interposed mildly.

"Seems to me our prosecuting attorney is forgetting himself so fur as to git all frothed up on noble ideas of justice before the defendant has had a fair chance to speak out in his own behalf. Crane may be guilty; then again, he may not be. Before committing his case to the jury I'm going to ask this defendant if he has anything to say for himself."

"Thanks, Judge. Reckoned you'd give me a chance." The crippled man had straightened up in his chair. "What I've got to offer might at first sound like past history, but it won't take me long to show where it hooks up with the case before you. As most of you know, Hollis an' I've been mining partners, he having staked me to grub fer a prospecting trip in return fer a half interest in the claim I filed on Caribou Creek. I panned some good prospects in the gravel but, on account of having but one arm to work with, I couldn't put down a hole to bedrock to see what really was there.

"But I've allus had a notion she was rich. So has some one else, I reckon, fer when I got back from the hospital at Fairbanks last spring I found some one had sunk a shaft. Thought at first it might be a stranger, but lately I've heard a story or two that leads me to believe Hollis was behind it, an' that he was figgering to flimflam me out of my share by one of them legal tricks that he knows all about. Didn't want to believe my pardner would throw me down, even if he is a lawyer. But it looked that way, an' so I laid me a plan to find out where he stood."

The defendant eyed the prosecutor speculatively. Then his even glance wandered to the jury.

"Now that I know where I stand with Hollis, reckon I'd better square myself with you fellers. Them silver and cross foxes was borrowed from Lem Anderson's fox ranch. Lem'll so testify. Like most fox farmers, he killed 'em by pressing down on their lungs with his knee; that's why there ain't no marks on 'em."

Some of the jurymen so far forgot themselves as to laugh. Hollis turned livid with rage.

"You'll have to answer for the poison. You can't lie out of that!"

"Don't have to lie out of it, Hollis. There's other ways of disposing of it."

The crippled man reached out for the bottle with his one good hand and, holding the cork between his teeth, twisted the bottle loose from it. Swiftly he dumped the contents into a glass of water. Before any one could reach him he drained the glass to its dregs. He shuddered slightly.

"That," he announced, "happened to be a damn' good dose of Epsom salts."

A PECULIAR ADVENTURE WITH A WHALE

By HAROLD WILLARD GLEASON

THE INSTINCTIVE mother love shown by cow whales which have lost their calves often lets fishermen in for a peck of embarrassment. The huge creatures thus bereft not infrequently come alongside unsuspecting fishing schooners and nuzzle their sides, with the results similar to those of a sudden and violent northeast squall.

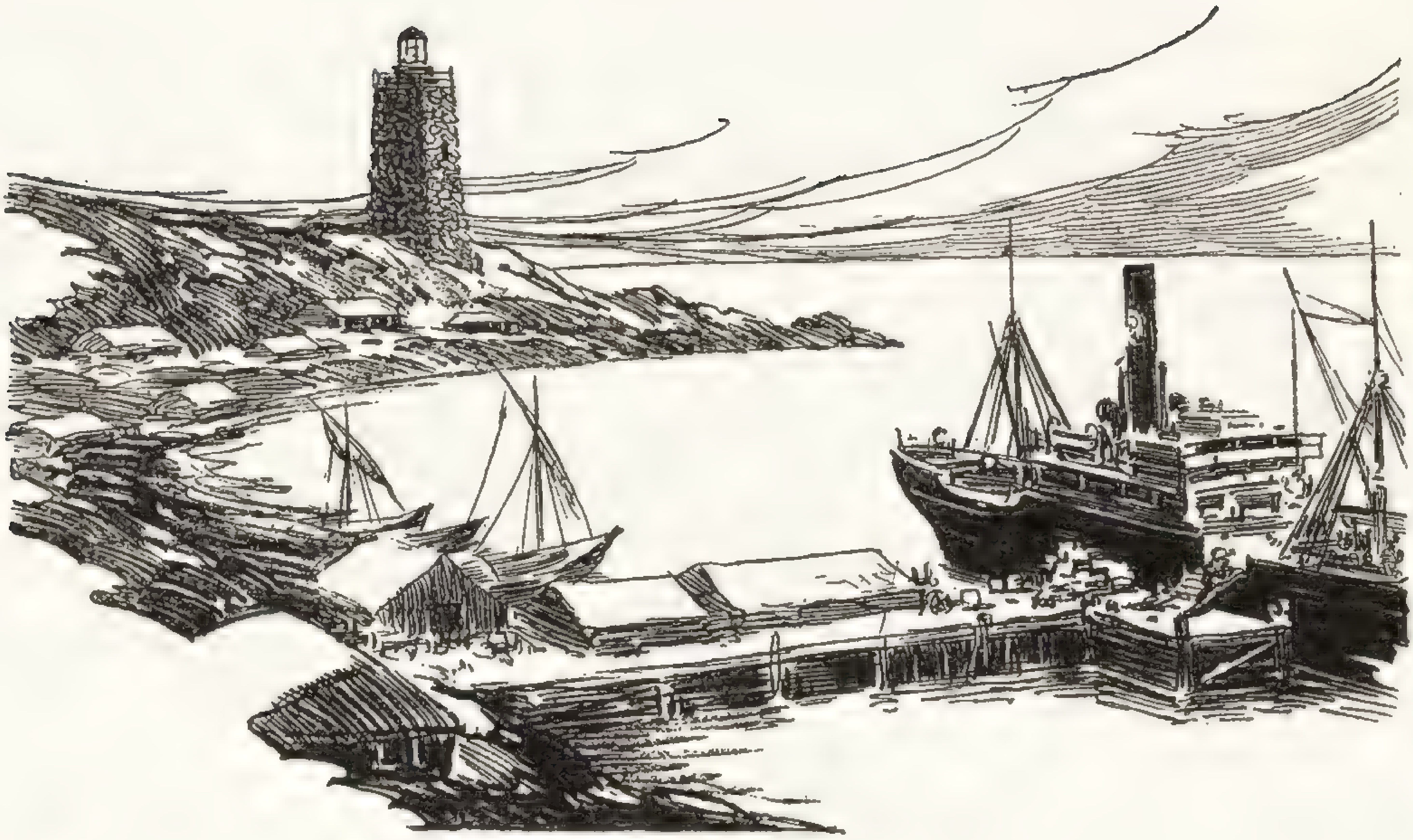
Nor are schooners the only craft to suffer from this whale mother love. Captain Al Spurr, a former Gloucester fisherman, tells a vivid story of a personal experience he and a dory mate had on the Grand Banks.

The two fishermen had been setting trawls and were enjoying a quiet smoke after a hard morning's work when they noticed that their dory was slowly rising out of the water. Too astonished to speak, the two gripped the thwarts of their little craft in amazement as it rose higher and higher until it sat perched high and dry on the black barnacled back of a regular old she-one that had gently slid up beneath the fragile boat.

Captain Spurr's dory mate seized a sharp, two pronged fish fork. He was about to jab it into the black back of the monster, when Spurr detained him.

"Wait," he said. "If you drive that fork into that whale, most likely it'll give one flip of its flukes and knock us plumb out of sight. Let me try a stunt my dad told me had been worked by another sailor in a fix like this."

Picking up the scoop bailer from the bottom of the dory, he began emptying the bilge accumulated during the days' fishing—dirty water containing odds and ends of bait, fish scales, grease and refuse of all sorts—over the side upon the whale's glistening back. After he had poured out a scoopful or two of the vile smelling liquid, the two men noticed to their great relief that the dory was sinking again as gently as it had risen, and soon with scarcely a noticeable ripple the whale slipped back into the green depths, leaving the dory with its two occupants riding safely upon an even keel.



CAPTAIN ROSE *and* *the* BULLFROG

A Story of the China Sea

By H. BEDFORD-JONES

THE GOOD ship *Ayuthia* was old and small, and rolled magnificently, and was filled with ants and rats and cockroaches, all of them champions for size. As the rice paddies and the mud flats of Saigon fell behind and merged with the horizon, a great and mournful melody arose from the two-score bullocks crammed into her forward well deck; they knew, those sad Indo-Chinese bullocks, that they were destined to fill the bellies of convicts. For the *Ayuthia*, bound for Singapore, would stop *en route* at the penal settlement, Pulo Coudore.

Others than the bullocks knew it also.

It was the southwest monsoon, and even the fresh sea wind was very warm. Captain Rose, comfortable enough in his faded pink pajamas, stood on the bridge chewing at his pipestem and plumbing the depths of his single passenger. Captain Rose, pock marked and bulbous nosed, whisky veins in his red cheeks and very strong of breath whenever he came on deck, was no beauty, and no saint either; but he was the proud possessor of a Board of Trade master's ticket, and twenty years of the China coast and parts adjacent, together with their native liquors, had enabled him to handle a ship blindfolded. Also, they had taught him to know a strong fish by the smell; and overnight he had concluded that Monsieur Hermant was a strong fish.

Hermant was a tall, lean, dark man, handsome in a saturnine way with his thin lips and direct, piercing dark eyes; square shouldered, thin in the hips, with the laziness of hidden agility in every move he made. He smoked whitish Dutch cheroots, which Captain Rose detested. And he stood the rolling deck like a seaman, which the skipper distrusted, having a conviction that no bullfrog could be a proper seaman. This, perhaps, because his mate was a pot bellied and sad eyed Frenchman from Bretagne, Kerguelec by name.

"Pulo Coudore, eh?" said Hermant. He spoke fluent English. "I did a year there as a *fonctionnaire*, when I was in the civil service. A rather attractive place, that. But don't you feel a slight sympathy with those poor convicts, doomed to spend long years on that coral reef in the middle of the ocean?"

"Not a bit of it," said Captain Rose, puffing at his briar to down the flavor of the abominated cheroot. "Not a bit of it. Deserve all they get."

Hermant inspected him half amusedly.

"But do they really?" he said, in his drawling voice. "Most of them, you know, are only deputies."

"Eh? Deputies?" queried the skipper.

"Yes. All natives. A rich Tonkinese desires to carve out his neighbor's insides and, say, appropriate his neighbor's wife. He does it scientifically. The police step in, the inspector investigates. Up bobs a poor coolie who confesses to the crime, with appropriate excuses; and twenty professional witnesses appear who saw him commit the crime. He is sentenced, say, to ten years penal servitude. He departs. At the end of ten years or so, if he is still alive, he returns home and the rich man provides the promised sum of money. The singular white man's law is satisfied, the rich man is satisfied, and the poor coolie is satisfied. Of course, should he die before the ten years are up, then he loses. The gambling instinct is strong, and adds flavor to the business. It's really quite sporting."

"Huh!" said Captain Rose. "It's damned foolishness, if you ask me. Dishonest."

"Were you never dishonest?" asked Hermant softly, looking at the horizon.

"No," said Captain Rose flatly, and removed his pipe to spit over the rail. "No! I've pulled a trick now and then, maybe; a bit o' smuggling or worse, but plain crooked. Nothing dishonest; too much like sneakin', if you ask me."

Hermant laughed a little.

"A singular joke, Captain—"

"Joke?" Captain Rose uttered certain foul and emphatic language. "Lookee, now! That there, what you just said, is French law for you. Aye, French!"

"This is not France," said Hermant. "Not all the convicts are deputies, of course; many of them are honest convicts."

"I've a damned sight more respect for 'em," said the skipper.

"Nonsense," and Hermant brushed Captain Rose and his ethics clear aside, as it were, with the one word. "Suppose you had a chance to help one of those deputy convicts escape, get away from the place, and make money doing it; would you assent?"

Captain Rose turned and stared blankly at him.

"Assent? Assent? And what for would I risk my ticket and my ship and my life, maybe, to help a lousy native escape? Wouldn't be worth it."

"Hm! It might be worth it," said Hermant, and paused briefly. "For instance, I know of a man there on Pulo Coudore, a typical case. Let us call him Koh Prap. Serving a life term. He got hired to do the job, took a false name, and was sent up for life instead of for two or three years as he figured. He's supposed, in his district, to be working somewhere up in Siam. What happens? A little piece of bare hill land he owned proves to have a vein of rich tin; an open cast mine develops there. The royalties pile up and can't be touched until some years are past and he's legally dead. Only his close relatives know that he's serving a life sentence on Pulo Coudore under the name of Koh Prap. So they come along and offer you, maybe, a hundred pounds, English money, to help Koh Prap get away by using your boat."

"And they'd jolly well get a kick in the pants for their pains," said Captain Rose hotly. "The chap gambled and lost. I'm not the man to help him sneak out of it."

There was an emphatic finality about this argument. Hermant frowned faintly.

"Well, the relatives can't touch any of that money until Koh Prap turns up to claim it," he said. "They've tried all sorts of tricks, even to inventing another Koh Prap; but when it comes to letting loose of money, Frenchmen are pretty cautious. Suppose they offered you five hundred pounds?"

"Or a thousand," said Captain Rose. "What's a thousand quid? Too much money to be had honestly in a day or two, that's what. Do you suppose a man like me'd risk his ticket and his ship on a sneakin' job like that. Do you, now?"

"But you'd smuggle," said Hermant.

"That's different," said Captain Rose stoutly.

"How is it different? It's breaking the law."

"Huh! A fool parliament or governor or somebody says, 'Don't you dare do this or that, or we'll clap you in jail if we catch you at it!' That's no law. That's a defiance. Like the liquor law in America. Makes a chap go do it, especially if he clears a bit o' money at it."

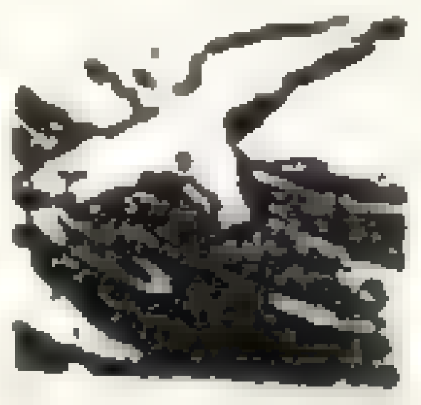
"But helping a poor devil get away to freedom, from a life sentence—"

"Is a sneakin' proposition," declared Captain Rose. "And if any chap came to me and made it flat out, I'd kick him in the pants. Yes, sir—and take my fist to him, to boot!"

With such unmistakable emphasis was this said that Hermant sighed, threw up his hands and walked away with a shrug of utter mystification. He could not comprehend this English captain's code in the least. He even doubted strongly whether Captain Rose had sensed the bait dangled before his bulbous nose.

He need not have worried. The skipper was nobody's fool. Captain Rose was the type of man, however, who has a certain odd code and can not be swerved from it by logic or gold; a most unreasonable code, if you like, but one to be fought for stoutly and never denied even under torture, mental or physical, simply because it was part of himself.

And whether you subscribe to the man's code or not, whether you think the man a hero or a damned fool, at least you are bound to admire him. For, when you get right down to bed rock, very few of us have any convictions which we think worth fighting for.



HERMANT did not waste any more words and time with the skipper. He realized that words were useless, and his time was short, since the sea road from Saigon to Pulo Coudore is not a long one, even for an old misbegotten tub like the *Ayuthia.*

The only other pure white man aboard was Kerguelec, a Breton; and being French, Hermant knew that Bretons can make an excellent living and save money, even in Scotland. Kerguelec was lazy and fat and predatory. He had been with the ship only one voyage, and had already conceived a violent dislike of the skipper, which was more than repaid in kind. So Kerguelec did not require any great persuasion to coincide with Hermant's way of thinking as regarded a hypothetical Koh Prap, or anything else. And Hermant had a way with him when it came to inspiring confidence in his abilities.

That afternoon Hermant might have been observed—but was not—in converse with certain coolies of the crew, and with the halfcaste second mate, and even with the chief engineer. His conversations had nothing to do with the matter, of course, but instead of making Pulo Coudore that same day, the *Ayuthia* wallowed with helpless engines, and wallowed all night, and wallowed well into the next morning, with the mountain peak of Pulo Coudore breaking the horizon, tantalizingly in sight but unreachable.

When her wallow ended and she got under way again, Captain Rose was nearly apoplectic, for now he could not get into the East Bay much before sunset, and since no unloading would be permitted at night, could not hope to get rid of his bullocks and freight before sometime in the following day.

Monsieur Hermant, however, looked very well pleased with himself. And Captain Rose observed it. The skipper went down to his own cabin, locked the door and sat down. He looked at himself in the cracked mirror, rather disgustedly, and got out a bottle, then put the bottle away again.

"Cat that's licked the cream, that's him," he muttered, and stuffed his pipe with well teased plug cut. "Somethin's up; no more drinking just now, Skipper. Hm! I wondered why this bullfrog was takin' passage aboard us."

Captain Rose smoked out his pipe, then shaved and got into clean pajamas and sent the steward to ask Hermant to his cabin. Presently Hermant sauntered in and nodded genially.

"Shut the door, sir," said the skipper, and eyed his passenger steadily. "Now, I've figured this thing out. You used to be stationed at the Island, you know the ropes, and you've been hired to get this what's-his-name away. Is that the ticket?"

Hermant looked astonished.

"What are you talking about, Captain?"

"About this beggar you were wanting me to take off—this Pap chap. None o' your tricks, now!"

A laugh broke from Hermant.

"Why, Captain, you misunderstood! I didn't want you to take any one off. We were just having a talk about the ethics of the thing; the case I laid before you was purely hypothetical."

"Hypo what?" said Captain Rose. He took a big .45 from his drawer and laid it on his desk shelf. "Whatever it is, I think you're a liar, and that's flat. You're slick, and I'm not; but no bullfrog is comin' aboard this ship and running her—not while I'm here. If there's any more talk about gettin' one of these beggars away from Pulo Coudore, then you'll run foul of a gun—and the authorities. Is that clear?"

The lean, sardonic features of Hermant remained as impassive as mahogany, but his dark eyes regarded the skipper very steadily.

"Your position is clear, sir," he rejoined, and bowed slightly. "I regret that you took my light words in earnest."

"I took 'em as they were meant," said Captain Rose, "and no mistake about it, neither."

Hermant bowed again and withdrew in silence.

The dignified air of his passenger, and his reception of what was undeniably provocative language, rather took Captain Rose aback. He went up to the bridge and the second officer, who had the deck, said in his sleek halfcaste way that they would be at anchor by sunset, whereat the skipper snapped an oath at him and went over to the port rail and stood there staring at Pulo Coudore. His faded blue eyes were very bright and clear and hard, which meant that he was in no mood to be spoken to.

As a matter of fact, Captain Rose was trying to reason with himself as he looked at the nine-mile main island, with its heavily timbered peaks mounting into the sky, and its attendant smaller islets. No convict had ever escaped from Pulo Coudore, and none ever would, he told himself; it was just impossible. The French had no boats except a rowboat and lighters. There were few natives on the island. The waters around were famous for huge sharks. No one was allowed ashore from visiting ships. And there you were. Even the *Ayuthia* would be boarded and guarded by black Colonial troops while she discharged cargo. And what could that slick bullfrog hope to do under such circumstances?

Captain Rose scowled at the island, where, in 1705, the sepoys of the East India Company's garrison had murdered all the whites except two, and decamped. He had heard of this massacre, and it occurred to him that Britishers had no luck in these islands anyhow.

"Well, if there's any scheme in that bullfrog's head, I've settled it for him now," thought the skipper, as the cool breeze calmed his choler. "He couldn't do anything without my help, and knows he won't have that; any blasted nigger that hired out as a convict and then comes into money and goes back on his bargain gets none o' my sympathy!"

He did not see the mate, Kerguelec, come up to the bridge, look at him standing there, then turn around and vanish again. He did not see the scowling look directed at him by the second officer; and he would not have cared a tinker's dam if he had seen either one. To him, the *Ayuthia* was his ship alone, and he alone was accountable for everything she did, and for what was done aboard her; and behind his bulbous nose, his veined cheeks, his hard and clear blue eyes, was a bulldog's stubborn spirit. Captain Rose could be, and was, pretty much of a scoundrel when he so liked, and Holy Joes had called him some stiff names; but he had never been called weak or irresolute or crafty.

The afternoon was waning when the old *Ayuthia*, chugging in among the islets, headed about for the red roofed rectangular Hon Bai Kan light on its high elevation, seven hundred feet above the sea, and drew in between the light and East Point, taking the northeast channel, since she was bound for the inner anchorage.

The bay opened up. There was the little pier with its rowboat and lighters, and behind it the white, red roofed buildings; back of this, again the native village and the sharply rising mountain, thick grown with small trees and brush. Kerguelec, who was new to this landfall, took the wheel himself while Captain Rose stood beside him as pilot.

"Now, Mister, look out for a three-fathom patch in the fairway," said the skipper, and pointed. "See that rocky elevation on the hill to the south? Keep it bearing 263° until that white marker on the shore yonder is bearing 230°; aye, now you have it rightly, Mister! Bring it ahead, now, bring it ahead; haul around to the nor'west, slow, now—there's a rock awash on the north side! Haul around, you blasted fool—can't you understand English? That's the way. See that radio station on the hill? Anybody'd look fine hauling off some o' them convicts, eh? Her call is FPR, and I'd hate to have her sending out for a gunboat to chase me, I would! Steady, now—need to have that landing pier bearin' 193! Here, give me that wheel and get to your station, blast you!"

So Captain Rose took the wheel, attended to the engine room signals himself, and the *Ayuthia* came to rest in the sunset glow, with a rattle of chain through the hawse. The sad bullocks, looking off at the shore, bellowed mournfully.

The rowboat was already putting out from the pier with a white uniformed official aboard, and Captain Rose was presently receiving his visitor—who shook hands warmly with Hermant before greeting the skipper. There was a drink down below, a talk about nothing, and the official, with many regrets that the unloading could not be accomplished that day, went ashore, thinking Captain Rose something of a boor.

The skipper went below and had a drink. After all, he reflected, there would be no escape from this place; it was quite impossible. Provided one of the beggars took a chance on the sharks and was hauled aboard, there was the cable to Cap St. Jacques and the radio station besides, so even a fool bullfrog would know it was a hopeless job. Besides, any one who escaped that night would be missed in the morning, and soon collared. With which comfortable, and entirely correct, reflection, Captain Rose retired for the night to a deck chair on the after bridge deck; his own cabin got entirely too much aroma from the bullocks in the forward well deck. And the fixed white light seven hundred feet above the sea shone all night like a blazing star to keep him company.

With morning the outer reefs were lines and eddies of white foaming blue; a cable was borne out by the rowboat and made fast aboard, and along this the two lighters were dragged by laughing, chattering convicts, very cheerful in their simple uniforms, as they pulled themselves out, hand over hand.

A dozen white clad negroes, colonials, with pistols at their belts, came aboard the *Ayuthia* and stationed themselves at rails and gangways; the winches rattled, the booms were swung out, the hatches taken off. The officer in charge of the detachment mounted to the bridge deck and stretched out comfortably in a chair beside Monsieur Hermant, who was watching proceedings lazily, and the two men chatted.

Aboard swarmed the convicts; to them, poor simple souls, this was a lark, and with gay chatterings in all the tongues of Indo-China they went to work getting the bullocks slung down into the lighters. Some of them scattered through the ship, begging food, offering for sale their coral and balloon fish and shells; there was a good deal of hilarity, and very little supervision. Escape was impossible, and all hands knew it.

So the bullocks were got rid of at last, and it came the turn of the cargo. All this while Captain Rose stood at the break of the bridge, vigilant and alert, clad now in his uniform whites, the jacket pocket bulging ominously. Nothing occurred to reward his keen glances, however, and he soon relaxed, handing out coppers to the convicts who begged from him, and buying a few odds and ends of coral or dried balloon fish.

The work was drawing to a close when a laughable incident took place. A group were scuffling on the forward deck, convicts and crew intermingled, and three or four of them pitched down headlong into the hold. There were screams of mirth in shrill voices, and one by one all emerged, unhurt. The work went on, Captain Rose watching while the second mate and a shore official tallied off the cargo.

It never occurred to any one, naturally, that in the trifling fall of a few men into the hold might lie something much greater; something, in fact, pregnant with life and death to more than one man, and with far reaching consequences.

So the work came to an end, and the convicts were tallied off; counted like cargo or bullocks as they crowded into the lighters; and dragged their way ashore once more, to their lonely island life. The papers were signed and taken care of. The officer shook hands all around and went ashore with his detachment; and the moment the rowboat was clear of the ship, Captain Rose sighed in relief. Then he lifted his voice in a bellow, and the *Ayuthia's* cable began to come in, and there was all kinds of confusion and noise, with winches rattling and booms being stowed and lashed and hatch quoins being hammered in place.

In five minutes she was standing about for the harbor mouth. Captain Rose, from the port side of the bridge, looked at the idly reclining figure beneath the awning and sniffed in triumphant disdain. Monsieur Hermant, smoking his inevitable cheroot, regarded the skipper with a lazy look and smiled to himself.

THE CREW of the *Ayuthia* was made up of all sorts of brown men, but they had not been picked at random. Captain Rose had done the work himself, and he had put the best ones into the black gang with intention.

He did not love his chief engineer; indeed, he browbeat and overawed him. And, being an Eurasian, the chief did not have enough backbone to stand up for his rights and make Captain Rose respect and like him. Instead, he hated secretly, after the manner of his breed, and let the skipper boss the engine room as no white chief engineer would have allowed for a minute.

These things had an important bearing upon events.

The *Ayuthia* had not come out of her way, as the Coudore group lies almost in the true Saigon and Singapore route. The rocky group was dropping out of sight over the horizon by noon, for a couple of hours saw her unloading finished; and Captain Rose, blessing the cool sea wind, turned in for a drink and a bit of sleep. Nor did he take the drink alone, for he met his mate, Kerguelec, in the passage; and being a man who sincerely wanted to be friends with all hands, he asked the Breton in with him, and they drank together heartily.

Oddly, perhaps, Captain Rose never forgave the man that drink, for he himself believed firmly that there was no viler sin than hypocrisy in the glass. And he was soon enough in discovering the extent of Kerguelec's friendship for him.

Eight bells, four in the afternoon, saw the skipper climbing on deck after another good drink. He looked things over pretty carefully, to be sure everything was stowed; for as he was wont to say, you never can depend on a bullfrog seaman for very long. He found nothing at which to cavil forward, and went back along the bridge deck for a look aft. He passed Hermant, sprawled lazily beneath the awning, and nodded genially, for he was never a man to cherish a grudge unless he thought he had reason to do so.

When he looked down at the after well deck he saw something that first drew his curious glance, then his scowling attention—and finally his presence.

Engine room watches had changed and the black gang were sluicing themselves off with cool water and capering around with shrill voiced mirth. Now, Captain Rose had not been twenty years in these seas for nothing, and he knew each of his dish faced brown men by sight. His eyes grew hard and bright as he looked. Then he deliberately descended the ladder, and noted grimly how, at sight of him, the men there dived for their clothes, though they were doing nothing forbidden. When he reached the well deck they were struggling with their scanty raiment.

Captain Rose walked up to one of them, who was screwing himself into an unaccustomed coat, and swung him around by the shoulder. He was a meek little chap, meeker even than a Malay—or rather, than a Malay appears to be.

"What's your name, you?" said the skipper, in what he called French.

"Nam Trang, m'soo," came the response.

"You're a liar!" retorted Captain Rose. "Nam Trang had a scar clear across his chin. Come on, now—what's your name?"

The Annamese looked at him fearfully and shrank away. The gaze of Captain Rose widened.

"What's all this!" he exclaimed. "Why, you ain't even one o' my hands! I thought you looked queer to me. Cochin China, or I'm a Dutchman! You're not from Annam, eh?"

"From Kamaut, m'soo," faltered the brown man, after a glance around. All his companions had fled.

"Huh!" exclaimed the skipper. Color came into his face suddenly, until he seemed in the throes of some inner convulsion. "Blast me—what's your name, huh? Is it Pap?"

The mild little man smiled at this.

"Koh Prap, m'soo—"

"Oh, Captain Rose! I say, Captain, would you step up here a minute?"

The skipper turned. Above, at the bridge ladder, he saw Hermant standing. It all came over him then in a flash—all of it. Impossible it was, rankly incredible; yet none the less a fact. The job had been pulled off under his nose, somehow. And there was Hermant intervening, cool, impassive, insolent; the chap must have scented trouble.

Captain Rose walked to the ladder and ascended silently. Hermant smiled in his sardonic way; he saw only a bulbous nosed, somewhat wheezy, rather apoplectic seaman. There was a good deal he did not know about seamen.

"Well?" said the skipper, when he came to the upper deck. There was nothing menacing about him, except that he was breathing a bit hard.

"You have uncovered the ruse," said Hermant, smiling a little.

"I've uncovered the skunk, you mean," said Captain Rose. "Koh Prap—is that the chap you were set on bringing off?"

Hermant nodded.

"Yes. And now that it's all over, Captain, you might as well accept the situation gracefully. You can still profit well by it. Not so well as you might have done, of course, since I had to take your officers and some of the crew in on this. But you'll find everything satisfactory."

The skipper's features slowly purpled, yet he managed to restrain himself.

"And just how," he asked, "did you turn the trick? Those convicts were counted off."

Hermant chuckled.

"How else? The same old way, Captain. A chap hired out to take Koh Prap's place ashore. He's one of the men you hired at Saigon. His family get the money, he stays on the island for a time, then confesses; he won't get a long sentence. They won't discover the error for quite a bit, if they ever do before he confesses. Clever, eh?"

"I said you were a slick 'un," returned Captain Rose. "Come on for'ard."

Amused, curious at this reception of the news, Hermant sauntered along. The *Ayuthia* did not boast of a bridge proper—merely a pilot house at the forward end of the bridge deck. Captain Rose stepped to the starboard ladder, then turned.

"I warned you what you'd get if you put this job over," he said, almost calmly. "There's the ladder, and you stay off this bridge in future."

Hermant got his promised reward.

It was no mere kick, no polite Gallic kick; it was not even a vicious kick; it was just such a strong, sturdy, unexpected lift of the boot as Captain Rose would have applied to any insolent foremast hand—and calculated for effect, not for looks. Hermant staggered under the impact, caught at the ladder rail, then whirled. Captain Rose kicked him again—and abruptly had a fight on his hands.

As a fight, it was neither long nor spectacular; though this was not the fault of Hermant. He drove in with sudden savagery—his features were contorted into a vicious and frightful mask of fury—and in this flashing instant of attack the skipper sensed swift and deadly peril, for the Frenchman had fallen into a fighting crouch and meant business. Captain Rose meant business too, and was more direct in his methods. Hermant ran into an upthrust knee and something smashed under his long jaw, and as he staggered, a heavy fist took him squarely amidships and knocked him down the ladder to the deck below like a sack of meal. For all his age and looks, Captain Rose was entirely ready and able to take on any bullfrog going.

With a satisfied grunt the skipper turned about and strode into the pilot house, where Kerguelec and a brown man gaped at him. He gave one curt order.

"Eh?" Kerguelec, a slow man to get into action, had not comprehended yet what it was all about. "But the course—"

"The course be damned!" said Captain Rose. "Back for Pulo Coudore and land that blasted convict and get Nam Trang aboard. Look alive, now!"

Kerguelec started to speak, then dissembled his scowl, nodded and gave the order. The sun was just touching the western horizon.

CAPTAIN ROSE ate a very hearty dinner, quite oblivious to the atmosphere around.

The last thing he expected was trouble. Hermant, not particularly damaged by his fall, was keeping to his own cabin; and the skipper did not know that the man had already taken care of every one in sight. In fact, all hands from chief officer to coolie were getting their large or small split of Hermant's money, and the officers did not like Captain Rose anyway, so that it was quickly known to all aboard that they were putting back to the island. The skipper did not order the luckless Koh Prap confined, for the chap could not escape from the ship, and was only a little brown beggar anyhow.

Captain Rose went to his cabin after supper and entered up matters in the rough log, so as to have everything shipshape. His eyes were open now—when those men fell into the hold, Koh Prap had exchanged clothes with Nam Trang, and that was all. Incredibly simple, and it had worked like a charm.

A knock on the door, and Kerguelec entered, leaving the door open. He came around to one side of the desk so that the skipper, in facing him, had his back to the door.

"Well, Mister," said Captain Rose, sitting back in his chair and reaching for his pipe, "and what's on your mind, eh?"

"I want to ask you about that man, Koh Prap," said the Breton stolidly. "Are you going to take him back?"

"Surest thing you know," answered the skipper.

"Why, Cap'n?" asked Kerguelec, wrinkling up his brow. "Because it is not right to take him away?"

"Huh! No," said the skipper. "He's just a poor sport, and I ain't risking my ticket and my ship to help him out, that's why. See here, Mister," he added suddenly, looking up with his keen glance, "why are you so blasted—"

A cloth fell over his head. His arms went up to it and were seized, drawn together, and lashed fast, all in an instant. His feet were caught and made fast to his chair. It was all done swiftly and without a false move, and next moment the skipper was blaspheming in choking darkness, until he had to stop for lack of air.

Then, presently, he heard the soft laugh of Hermant, and squirmed at the sound.

"Now enjoy yourself, Captain," said the Frenchman, with insolent triumph. "You're not hurt, and you'll not interfere. Later on you can set the police after me and be damned to you. Goodby!"

The door slammed.

Captain Rose relaxed and became quiet; he could breathe, and not much more. To sit there with a stifling, dirty cloth flung loosely over his head, wrists lashed together, feet lashed to his chair, was chastening medicine to any apoplectic soul. Fortunately, the cloth was not tied about his neck, or he might well have stifled. He could even tell that the cabin lights were still left burning; and from the squeaking rattle of the chains, knew the *Ayuthia* was changing course. Then she began to wallow and roll, and Captain Rose whistled softly. This wallow meant that she was heading westward. With this realization, he understood everything—even Hermant's plans.

His chair tipped a little with the wallow and instinctively he tried to brace himself, but of course could not. If it went over, no help for it—he would go as well!

Mutiny? He was not so sure. Hermant was a sly bullfrog and no mistake. Kerguelec was in on it, of course, and every one else aboard, probably. Thought of the mate brought a swirl of fury into the skipper's brain. Another bullfrog, damn him! Kerguelec had been talking to him, had left the door open, had got his back to it. Then some of them had sneaked in and bagged him, quite literally. Who had done it? He had not the least idea.

Not that it would matter particularly. As Hermant's story had more than hinted, there was big money involved, and the bullfrog could afford to grease every palm liberally. Beyond any doubt, Kerguelec was heading the *Ayuthia* west for Point Obi; Hermant and Koh Prap and anybody else who might run foul of Admiralty law would skip ashore, and then Captain Rose might have his ship again. Nobody would be hurt, and the story would be a laughing matter rather than an outrage.

"That's his scheme, and it's good," muttered the irate skipper. "Devilish, blasted good! That is to say, from his point o' view. It ain't so good from—"

The *Ayuthia* executed a truly beautiful wallow as though imitating a movement from a dance. Captain Rose felt his chair tip up on one side, hesitate—then he and the chair went down together in a crash that hurt his shoulder and head and drew a muffled blast of profanity from him.

With the fall, the cloth over his head fell away. His profanity ceased.

Yes, his cabin was lighted, and the telltale on the ceiling showed the ship was heading west by a half north, as he had figured. He lay there blinking, on his side; the old chair had collapsed in the fall, but enough of it remained together to keep the skipper quite helpless for the moment; also, he was badly jarred. With another roll, he slid in the opposite direction; then came a nice, smooth, apparently unending wallow, and Captain Rose went cursing down the floor to fetch up with another crash against the bulkhead.

"Blast an' damn it!" he said, with emphasis. Then, "Hullo, now! What's this?"

This second jarring crash had pretty well finished the chair, which was no William Morris product at best. The top of it came clear out of the seat, which naturally loosened the bit of line fastening the skipper's right arm, and the left arm came free a moment afterward.

With both his arms free, thirty seconds sufficed to free his ankles, and Captain Rose stood up. He was so overcome that he could not find words; he stood blinking, rubbing his wrists, looking around. With the next roll he gravitated toward his locker, took a good stiff drink straight from the bottle, and looked for his old revolver. It was missing.

"Ah!" said he, and smacked his lips.

He never felt quite right without his after dinner pipe, which he had not yet lighted. He went over to the table, picked it up, struck a match, and braced himself against the ship's roll as he puffed.

"Now, let's see. That blighted bullfrog didn't lock the door—or did he?"

The door was unlocked.

Kerguelec would have his gun, of course; but no matter. The skipper went grimly into his trunk and presently found what he sought—a slungshot he had taken away from a thug on the Rangoon waterfront one night. It was no ordinary slungshot, but a bit of devil's artistry, the weight being slung at either end of a length of stiff, springy rhinoceros hide sewn about a strip of whalebone. Captain Rose had often wondered just what a man could accomplish with this weapon, and now he grunted with satisfaction as he hefted it.

He paused, reflecting. Everything was probably topsy-turvy now; no telling who would have the bridge, or what. So, as minutes counted, he delayed only long enough to get into his uniform whites and pull down his cap; then he pulled open the cabin door and stepped out into the passage, the implement of destruction peeping from his jacket pocket.

The first person he saw was the second officer, just emerging from his own cabin. Captain Rose wasted no talk. The unfortunate halfcaste gaped at him with fallen jaw and stood there paralyzed with astonishment until the skipper's fist knocked him backward, and the skipper followed him into the cabin and stood over him as he lay, not daring to move.

"You this-and-that," said Captain Rose, without mincing words in the least, "so you've taken Hermant's money, huh? Where's your gun?"

"In—in the locker there, sir," stammered the second officer.

The skipper took it, found it to be a loaded automatic, and pocketed it with a grunt of satisfaction.

"You stay here and keep your jaw closed until I send for you," he said, and stalked out of the cabin, turning the key on the outside of the door before departing.

Then he stamped off, making for the bridge, knowing Kerguelec would be there. He felt an exasperated desire to use his fists on that man, but regretfully concluded the slungshot would be safer, at least at the first.

Kerguelec was indeed on the bridge; so was the Eurasian chief, and a Tonkin seaman was at the helm, since the *Ayuthia* far antedated steam controls. The mate and the chief were conferring as to the best place to leave the ship and reach

Siamese territory, when a frightened squawk broke from the Tonkinese. He had seen the figure of the skipper rise in the darkness from the starboard ladder. Kerguelec caught the warning and rose, jerking out his gun.

Both doors of the pilot house were open. Captain Rose came in the port door, and came in fast, just as the gun jerked up in Kerguelec's hand. The slungshot struck the mate's wrist, and his bullet went up through the ceiling, and the gun fell from his hand. The chief was whipping out a knife, but he did not use it, for the skipper whirled on him and clipped him twice over the head. The wretched chief engineer collapsed like a limp sack on the cushions of the locker.

"Well, Mister," said the skipper to Kerguelec, "I'm going to learn you a few things."

And, dropping his weapon, he waded into the Breton.

Kerguelec knew his business. He got in two smashing drives over the heart that staggered the skipper, then cracked in a beauty for the jaw, with full weight behind it. Captain Rose ducked, stopped it with his skull, and the mate's wrist snapped. The skipper cracked in a one-two, and Kerguelec, whirling, ducked and dropped to the floor. Captain Rose forgot about the *savate* until the mate's heel took him under the chin and dropped him like a shot.

As he lay, the skipper reached desperately for the slungshot, came up with it, and met the mate's rush squarely. He had been a fool to let go his weapon, and knew it. Now he drove in mercilessly, spat after spat, the deadly springing thing in his hand landing repeatedly until Kerguelec was weaving on his feet and spitting blood and groggy oaths.

"Take your lesson, you blasted bullfrog!" said the skipper grimly, and went ahead with his work. Nor did he cease until Kerguelec slipped to his knees, a bleeding, incoherent mass, and then the skipper disdainfully booted him behind the ear and let him sprawl out on the deck.

"And a good job," said Captain Rose, as he went to the wheel.

He spun it, glanced into the binnacle, and watched the *Ayuthia* swing around on the compass. The Tonkinese had long since fled, and various noises were ringing through the ship, which Captain Rose disregarded. He had to guess at a course for Pulo Coudore, but he was good at such work; presently he grunted with satisfaction, spun over the wheel, and slipped the loops over the spokes.

"Put up your hands, you fool!"

The crackling voice sounded from the starboard door. Captain Rose looked over his shoulder and saw Hermant standing there, gun in hand. Excited chatterings, dim shapes, showed that with Hermant were some or most of the crew, and there was a flash of steel in the starlight.

"Huh?"

Deliberately the skipper thrust his hands into his jacket pockets. Hermant's gun jerked at him.

"Up, I said!" snapped the man, his face tense, dangerous. He took a step forward.

"What'll you do—shoot me?" queried the skipper, getting the automatic in his fist.

Hermant saw the movement, saw the skipper duck sidewise, and fired. The two shots came almost as one. Captain Rose spun about, then fired again as he straightened. The tall figure of Hermant seemed to fall back from the doorway, a splotch of red spreading over its breast.

Then the skipper found them all around him—brown men, naked, knives glinting.

He groaned as steel ripped into his flank; groaned even as he fired, sending bullets pointblank into the crowding figures. He did not even take the automatic from his pocket; his white drill coat flamed until it burned his hand. *Click-click*—and his weapon was empty, brown men still around him.

Another knife reached him—some one in the gang banged out with a revolver, the bullet going high. Then Captain Rose got the slungshot in his fist, and with a grunt hurled himself at the lot of them, and his roaring bellow filled the pilot house as the weapon lashed.

The *Ayuthia* presented a remarkable spectacle as she crawled into the bight of Pulo Coudore toward sunset of the following day.

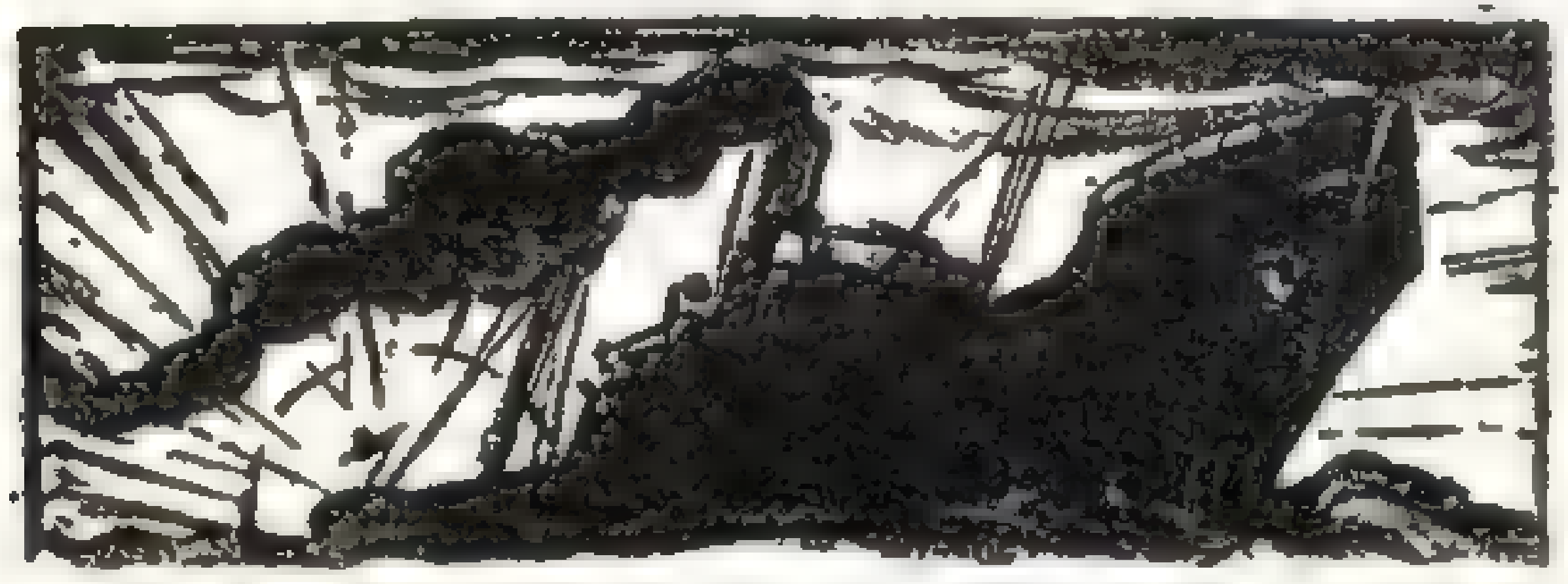
Captain Rose stood on the bridge. He was not handsome, for he was quite naked except for numerous iodine stained bandages that encompassed shoulder and ribs and thighs. His mate—the former second officer—had a bandaged jaw, and Kerguelec lay on a mattress under the awning, much more completely bandaged than was the skipper, and with more need. His chief engineer had a head swathed in cloths, and a number of the crew were obviously patched. Up in the bow, out of the way, lay the white figure of Hermant, and the brown figure of Koh Prap, equally dead; and several hurt men were groaning in the forward well deck.

The chain rattled out. Captain Rose saw the rowboat setting off from shore, and with a grunt went into the pilot house and sat down. He had better log this thing in the rough log before he went any farther. He got out the book and pencil, and chewed the latter for an instant, then set down his entry:

> This day and date weather fair. Crew mutinied last night, led by passenger and mate and escaped convict. Am landing passenger and convict for burial. Mate going to Singapore for trial. Two ton coal wasted.

He read over his entry, approved it, and thrust away the log.

"That ought to satisfy 'em," said Captain Rose. "And now I reckon that bullfrog coming off can stand a drink with me, huh? All goes to show that Hermant should ha' picked another ship to try his tricks on. But I never did see a bullfrog that had good sense. Huh!"



HOLY MAN

By

GENERAL RAFAEL DE NOGALES

TRAVELING from Coimbra in Portugal toward Badajoz in Spain, the railroad traverses a sparsely inhabited region which, beginning in the central Portuguese plains, rises to the pine covered heights of the Sierra Morena and flattens out again into the great valley of the Tagus. After the close of the Spanish-American War, which I had spent fighting in the Cuban *manigua*, I was making my way back to Spain over this region when the railway tracks were discovered to be torn up near the village of Faroes, just beyond the frontier. Traffic would be held up for several days, we were told, so we had to seek whatever accommodations the villagers could spare. I took my bag, handed it to one of the small boys that stood observing the engine as if it were a curious animal, and told him to take me to a bed and a meal.

The boy took me to see the priest who, he said, was the only man around there that took in strangers. The priest turned out to be a fat old fellow whose bad humor seemed to be chronic. Even when he joked—as he did with me, about the insects that ravaged his house—he did it bitterly and in a rasping tone. He had no beds. Other passengers had preceded me and contracted for the available ones. He had no cots, no mattresses, no blankets, no food, no desire to be of service, no patience, no charity and no manners.

The only thing I could do, the boy told me, was to go to the Franciscan monastery of Mariñao, ten miles away, and ask for hospitality there. He could procure a mule, he said, and would gladly guide me. How much? Four pesetas, he said, believing that I would offer him two. I said I would give him the four pesetas, and he ran to get the mule, singing in celebration of his great fortune.

The trail to the monastery was a narrow and broken one. In many places it was nothing more than a dent on the precipitous slopes of the Sierra Morena. It was overhung with huge broad pines and broke its way through dry thorny bushes or around enormous gray boulders. Occasionally, turning a bend, I caught a sudden view of a stream far below, twisting its course along a ravine or spreading its waters on a miniature valley, a string of silver glistening in the sun. Then the view disappeared as quickly as it had appeared, for the trail seemed averse to keeping a straight line and it kept yanking you from one landscape to another, like a child in a toy shop pulling its mother right and left from one counter to the next.

The sun declined below my feet, and there was an early moonrise, which silvered the sky and gave the trees and the slopes an intense black velvet radiance. The boy, who was riding behind me on the same mule, pointed over my shoulder to the monastery of Mariñao, a flat, brown, two story edifice with great homely colonnades, tucked away between two hills in the distance. A few minutes later we were alighting in front of its low portal, and a young man who had been smoking a cigaret beneath the great *alcornoque* that shaded the entrance was welcoming me with an amiable smile and saying that he would go notify the abbot at once.

The difference between these holy men and the priest of Faroes at once became evident. It was a pleasant surprise, for I had expected to find an isolated community of men in robes, soured by too much religion and loneliness. Instead, I found the most lovable and serene company of good fellows I could ever hope to share food and drink and loafing with. The vigorous middle aged abbot looked like a business man whose business was to be kind to strangers. His manner was quick and efficient and he seemed to be thoroughly interested in whatever he happened to be doing at the moment—whether it was ordering a good bottle of wine for his guest or making arrangements for the pasturing of the monastery's sheep. He smoked with me in the colonnaded gallery while dinner was being prepared and told me about the joys of peaceful life, appearing at the same time to be very interested in the joys of the active life, as exemplified in the anecdotal scraps of the Cuban war which I let drop to entertain him. He said that it was always a pleasure to them to receive strangers and hear of the interesting and frightful things that they were missing in Mariñao by keeping away from the outside world.

At the refectory, a large stone room with enormous windows opening into the stars, twenty monks foregathered and some bottles of special wine were uncorked in my honor, or in honor of the world outside as represented at that moment by a young adventurer fresh from the ancient sport of drawing blood. The conversation, which was general and very jovial, turned on the relative merits of the active and the contemplative life. I, with all the swagger and assurance of youth, told them that their life was very pleasant and very beautiful, but far too tame. The abbot smiled and declared that God must be served even at the cost of tameness.

"No!" I shot back. "You have to serve him by action."

"By any sort of action?" a monk parried. "How can you know whether your actions are good or evil?"

"I don't pretend to know. I just act and take a chance that it's all for the best. A man can do nothing better than that which he loves to do."

The abbot felt friendly and paternal toward me, and he condescended to argue—although I think he really enjoyed arguing.

"We tell the poor to pray and be decent, and then we intercede to have their prayers answered," he said.

"Nonsense. Prayers are never answered. Good and bad things happen to people, and if they pray every night they can attribute the good things to their prayers. That's all."

ALL DURING the repast a gaunt monk with a flowing black beard and a ruddy skin tight over the angular bones of his face had been looking at me without saying a word. I had a strange feeling that I didn't want him to say anything, because if he did it would be something to spoil my argument, something to embarrass and disconcert me. Now he spoke in a steady, low voice that flowed out of his beard like quiet thunder out of a dark cloud. He said—

"Are you very tired?" And when I, taken aback a bit by his finally speaking, boasted in defense that I was never tired, he said, "Would you like to see a prayer answered?"

"I certainly would," I said, "for once."

He asked me if I would follow him without asking questions, and I told him that I considered questions useless.

After dinner the abbot played me a game of chess on the gallery, while the pines on the mountain tops swayed in the clear moonlight. A few monks hovered about our table watching us, discussing the moves in whispers among themselves.

Then the abbot rose, took my arm, and we followed a young novice. Sandals echoed as they slapped the flagstones of the gallery. I noticed that, instead of taking me to the part of the building where I had supposed the cells were, we descended the stairway and came out on the portal. Two saddled horses were waiting under the *alcornoque*. The tall monk was already mounted on one of them.

"That is your horse," he said, "and you never ask questions."

I mounted and he led the way. He did not seem to be following any path, but cut his way through the thorny bushes, guided by nothing save the shifting breeze and an uncanny knowledge of the sierra. We tumbled down slopes, scrambled up stiff mountainsides.

A ravine brought us to a small valley in the center of which a light glimmered. It was at a window, and the window belonged to a squat stone house. We approached and, leaning down on the necks of our horses, looked through the window at the scene inside. A peasant was lying on a cot, covered to the neck with blankets, apparently asleep. A very thin woman was boiling something in a kettle hanging inside the fireplace. A tallow candle burned beside the bed, and over the mantle two smaller candles threw a flicker on a small wooden image of the Virgin. Whenever the woman passed the image, she would cross herself and stop to mumble a prayer.

The monk turned to me.

"Juancho is sick and he has lost all he had in the world except his woman and his soul. It was stolen from him—his sheep. He tried the justice of men, and the lawyer in Coimbra took the little money that he had in gold. Juancho is very intelligent but he does not know how to read. Now he has nothing to hope for but the justice of God. He and his woman are praying for it."

I said nothing, and we rode away.

It must have been close to midnight when we entered a ravine formed by the almost perpendicular walls of two mountains. The trees on either slope shot out horizontally and, interlacing their branches, weaved a roof overhead. Upon rounding a turn in the zigzagging ravine, we came upon a bonfire around which the figures of men and horses were silhouetted—black vivid shadows against the red glow. The men were singing and making merry, but when the monk dismounted among them, they took off their hats and greeted him respectfully.

"Good evening, *padre*."

"Your blessing, *padre*."

The monk held a whispered conversation with one of the men and then gave the order to break camp. He rode ahead of the troop, which consisted of about thirty or forty men, well mounted, each armed with a *trabuco*, a sort of gun that can be loaded with anything—rocks, pieces of metal, whatever may come to hand. A man has only to carry a *trabuco* and a pouch of powder and he needs no more equipment to fight all the *guardias civiles* in the Sierra Morena.

Before my eyes, before I could explain clearly to myself what had happened, a queer, silently praying monk had turned into a bandit leader, his robe tied in a knot below his belly, his sandals firm on the stirrups, his commands obeyed unquestioningly by a gang of reckless, well armed, bandanna hatted mountaineers. I trailed along, ashamed of my youthful bragging of several hours earlier. The monk had been given a *trabuco* and another had been handed to me. We left the ravine and scrambled up the sierra.

Our route lay uphill along starlit mirages of incredible, wild splendor. It seemed that we were going to scale the battlements of heaven. The monk addressed me once during the climb.

"At first I did not carry any weapons, but I realized it was not right to make other men kill and not take the same chance of sinning that they did. Now I shoot to kill, as a matter of conscience, but I swear I do not like it."

They seemed strange to me, the things that men who listened to their consciences heard. Nevertheless, the monk's attitude was certainly reasonable.

THE CLIMB brought us to a sort of plateau, a wide plain held up to the sky, interspersed with boulders and trees. In the distance a large low house could be distinguished in the glare of the moon. No lights were visible.

After a brief consultation, the monk divided his men into three groups. One departed to the left, one to the right; and the other one waited where I remained at his side. The monk took time to smoke a cigaret I offered him, sitting on the ground propped up against a tree. Then he mounted and we approached the house. A shot shattered the silence and echoed swiftly among the boulders. A fusillade crackled and I could see the sparks coming from the direction of the house. One of the other groups had been attacked. We saw the vague shapes galloping to the house, breaking through the defenders with the butts of their *trabucos*. Some more shapes emerged from the house and fired away.

Our men—at the sight of fighting I had identified myself with the monk's purpose, whatever it might be—took to cover in a clump of trees. Presently, having dismounted, they opened fire from behind boulders and tree trunks. The men from the house crept up on them, crawling on their bellies. I could see the sparks of their firing drawing close to the clump of trees. Then the monk gave the word and we rode upon them at full gallop, shooting them down and beating them with the butts of our *trabucos*. A few of them could get back into the house, but it was of no avail. The monk, with his hood drawn over his eyes, fought like a wildcat. He broke in a window and ran through the house like mad, followed by a dozen of his men and myself. He fought with his knife, with his teeth, with his gun—above all with the fire that seemed to burn in his soul.

The house and surrounding fields had been guarded by the friends of the owner—I learned afterward that he was a rural political boss—and two squads of *guardias civiles*. We captured most of them, with their Napoleonic hats, their blue and red frockcoats, their rattling sabers and booming carbines and their fearful mustaches.

While the fight was going on in and near the house, the sounds of another skirmish floated on the air from beyond the house, on the side opposite from that on which we had attacked it. I called the monk's attention to this, but he disregarded it. By that time my adolescent loyalty had acquired a complete confidence in the holy man's strange ways.

And the holy man was right. The shots died down as suddenly as they had started up. We bound the prisoners, locked them in the house and left as calmly and mysteriously as we had arrived. A short distance from the house we came upon the third group of our men, herding sheep down the trail. Then I understood completely the monk's way of interceding so that the prayers of the poor and oppressed might be answered.

When we passed the valley where the sick man lay, the sheep were led into his corral. The monk stepped into the house for a moment, only to say—

"I see you have your sheep back."

The woman wanted to fall on her knees and kiss his sandals. He took her by the arm and led her to where the image of the Virgin glowed in the candlelight. That was all.

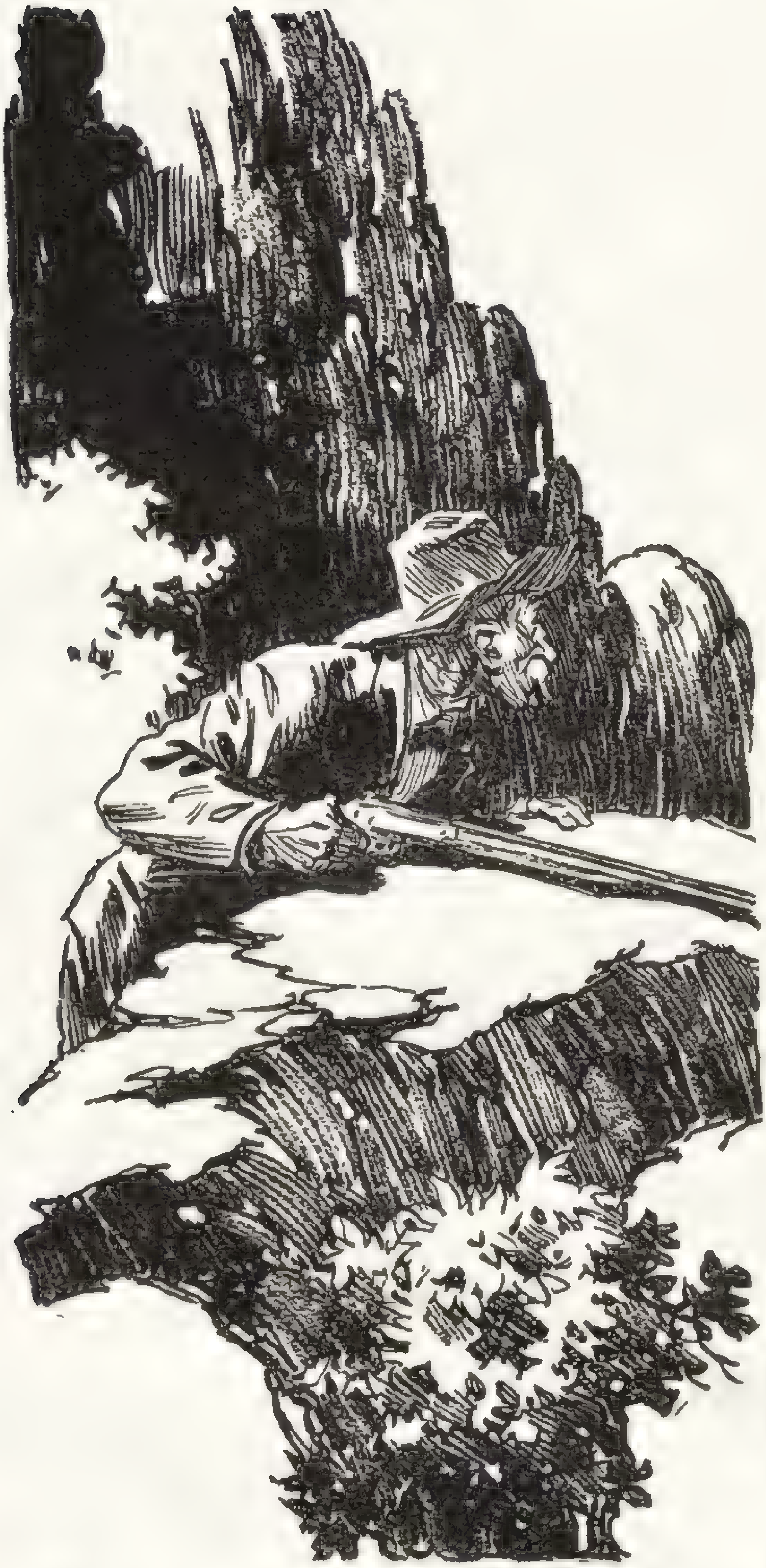
Dawn found the monk and myself breakfasting in the dark refectory of the monastery, across the frontier. He looked at me without smiling.

"Do you believe now that the prayers of the poor are sometimes answered?" he asked, while he munched hungrily at a big piece of black bread.

I had a tremendous admiration for the man; but it did not seem to me that he had proved his case. I said—

"You don't trust God to answer the prayers of the poor, so you answer them yourself."

"But God made me," he said simply. "And that is an answer."



A Story of the Western Homesteaders and a Man Who Never Grew Old

By

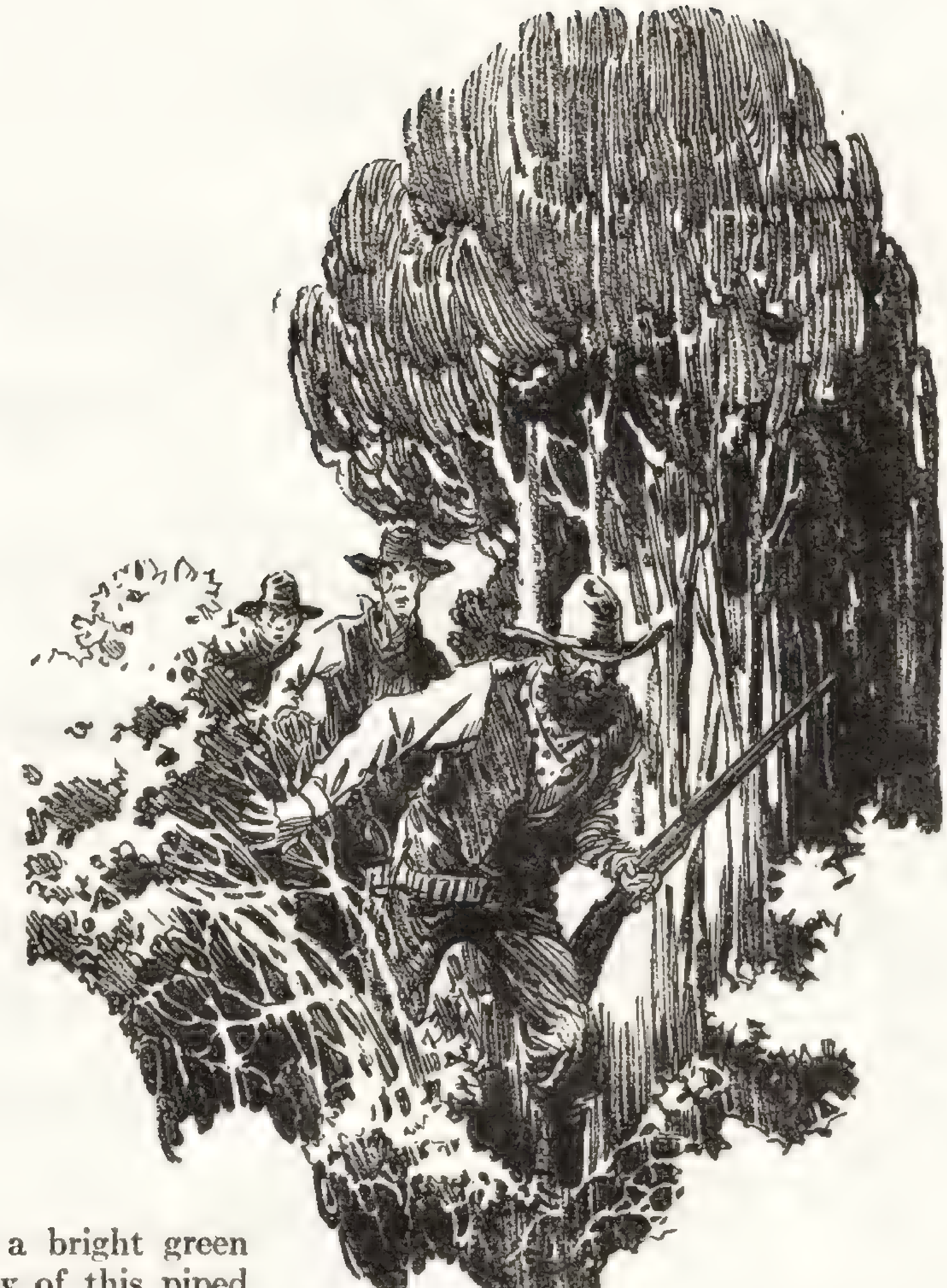
FREDERICK J. JACKSON

IT WAS about three-quarters of a mile of steep, oak covered slope from the creek to the top of the ridge. Nearer the creek than the summit lay a semi-oval bench of several acres. This level flat had been partly a grassy opening, but a multitude of small stumps showed that the opening had been enlarged. All trees on the bench had been cleared away with the exception of some large oaks which had been left to provide shade for the homesteader's two-room cabin. The latter, neatly stained and painted, stuck up like a sore thumb. It was the work of an amateur carpenter, built of lumber, every stick of which had been snaked for seven miles over a mountain trail by a saddle horse.

Up the trail leading from the creek came a man on horseback; a young man in his late twenties, wearing a sleeveless shirt and overalls that were faded to a sky blue from many washings and patched with even lighter material from an older pair. In one hand the horseman carried a small bucket by the bail, holding it well away from his leg. Beneath the other leg, in a scabbard, was tucked a .30-30 Winchester carbine.

The rider dismounted to open the gate at the head of the creek trail. As he stepped off the horse he swung the bucket carefully, for it was nearly full of water. One hundred yards from the gate, inside the carefully fenced enclosure, clear water ran from a pipe and oozed away along

NOT SO OLD AT THAT



A COMPLETE NOVEL

several small furrows in a bright green patch of alfalfa. In view of this piped water right at hand, the carrying of water up the steep creek trail seemed to be a strange act. But the man's next action was even stranger. He abruptly placed the bucket on the ground, stepped to the horse and snatched the carbine from the scabbard. The next moment he was inside the gate and running across the enclosure toward the gate on the opposite side. He had heard a horseshoe click on a rock somewhere along the upper trail.

Down this trail came a horseman, clad in a new tan whipcord suit. His hat was an Army style Stetson, with a fore and aft crease in the crown. The lower ends of his trousers were tucked down into a pair of new high heeled cowboy boots. They were of black leather, highly decorated with fancy stitches in red and yellow cord. It was the garb of a man who had compromised in the middle with the present, but had clung to the past at both ends.

He was an elderly man, but in many ways he seemed to have refused to surrender his youth. His eyes were bright and shrewd. As he rode he kept closing one of them because of the smoke from the cigar which his mouth held up at a cocky angle. His leathery cheeks were cleanly shaved, but his upper lip was adorned with a drooping gray mustache of old fashioned cut. A spiky goatee served to give the old man an air of extreme self-confidence, even of mild belligerence.

Some fifty or sixty yards above the upper fence around the flat, he pulled in his horse. Below, above the intervening brush, he could see part of a red roof—a shake roof, stained red. What he had stopped to examine leisurely, however, was a dirt tank. A hole about ten feet square had been dug in the steep hillside, and the excavated earth had been piled in a crescent shaped rampart around the lower edge of the hole. At one point this dam recently had been dug away, to drain the tank. The gap was still open. A pipe left the tank at the bottom of this gap and ran downhill through the brush. A shovelful of earth had been thrown into the gap on top of the pipe, obviously to permit the pipe to carry off the normal flow of the spring.

What seemed to interest the rider most was the exceptionally strong fence around the tank. The woven wire and the barbed wire above it were natural parts of a fence, but the rider seemed puzzled as he waggled the cigar between his lips and tried to figure out the reason for the small logs that lay on the ground along the outside of the fence. The logs had been wired to the posts.

"What's your business here?" a voice inquired.

THE RIDER jerked his head around, to face the homesteader, who had appeared in a bend of the trail a few yards downhill. He noted the young man's belligerent air; he saw the thumb curled over the hammer of the carbine. He kept a blank expression on his face as he responded—

"I'm looking for Mr. Meredith."

"Well, you're looking at him now. Can't you read?"

"Yeh, I read your sign up the trail. A danged strong, stiff warning, son. I enjoyed every word of it."

A quizzical gleam stole into the old man's young eyes. He replaced the cigar between his lips and calmly puffed at it, meanwhile continuing to gaze at the homesteader, who now seemed to be slightly disconcerted.

"Well, I meant every word of it!" the homesteader retorted lamely. "Why didn't you shout that you were coming, like the sign warned you to, before coming on my land?"

"Oh, I jest wanted to see what would happen," the old man drawled. "Jest testing out a theory, so to speak. I've got an idea that when a man puts up a sign to the effect that he's gonna shoot, he ain't so liable to shoot as he thinks he is. Son, I'm sure glad I took a notion to come to these parts." This was said with a big grin.

"Who are you?"

"I'm your wife's sole, surviving relative. I'm Newt Lucas, Ethel's grandpap's brother. I trust that I'll find Ethel in good health."

"She's not in good health," Meredith blurted out, as he advanced to shake hands with his great-uncle by marriage. "But she's recovering," he added.

"I'm glad to hear that," said Newt, turning his gaze back to the waterhole. "If it's all the same to you, son, I crave knowledge. How come you spent all that work putting logs around the bottom of the fence?"

"To keep hogs out. The poles prevent 'em from getting a snout under the wire. If a big boar or a big sow once gets its face under the wire, it's goodby fence. They've got a lift like a hydraulic jack."

"That so? Well, le's amble down and let me surprise Ethel. I ain't seen her since she was a baby—twenty years ago—jest before her mother moved to Californy."

"She's not here. She's in the hospital, down at Valley City."

"Sho! That's too bad. How come that you're not down there?"

"Because I was lucky—or something. Oh, you mean why I'm not at her bedside? Well, I stayed in Valley City for eight days. Then I ran out of cash and had to come home. I came back to round up some of my hogs—to sell them to get cash to pay the hospital bill."

"What's Ethel sick of?" Newt inquired.

"Typhoid fever. That spring—" Meredith pointed to the dirt tank—"was deliberately polluted by somebody."

"It was, hey? Could you find his foot tracks?"

Mr. Lucas puffed rapidly at his cigar. His eyebrows had drawn down; his eyes glinted. He stared at Meredith.

"No. The clan is too smart to leave tracks. This man had wrapped gunny sacks around his feet. He sneaked up from the creek bottom at night. Then he went back down to the creek. You can't trail anybody on those rocks."

"The clan, hey?"

"Yes, the clan. Come on down to the house. If you'll listen you'll hear plenty about the clan."

Some minutes later, the two men entered the house. Meredith leaned the carbine against a wall. Newt Lucas lighted a fresh cigar, then leaned back in a chair.

"I take it, son, that this clan you mention consists of the earliest settlers in these parts," he said.

"How did you know? Did Ethel write to you about them?"

"Not a word. You had no troubles—in her letters. She's plumb game, I reckon. She was enthusiastic, that was all. She told about the buildings you had put up, the fencing you'd done, the water pipes you had hooked up—things like that. What she was plumb tickled about was that the outdoor life and this high, dry climate had sorta restored your health and had put some meat back on your bones. I understand that you were poorly when you fust moved up here."

"I was. But how did you guess about the clan?"

"Not much of a guess, son. I reckon it's jest the same old story being repeated. Killings, burnings, theft, poison—anything to discourage and drive out the homesteaders. The same old set of tricks is allus used. I'll be plumb surprised if you can tell me one thing that the clan has done that hasn't already been done a thousand times in other parts. Why, I was a homesteader, myself, fust in Wyoming, then in Colorado, back in the late eighties. Le's see, that was—doggone! That was 'way over twenty years ago. Nearly thirty years."

"THAT was about the time that Old Man Moffitt first settled up here," said Meredith. "He built a log cabin on a hidden flat about three miles down the creek. My private suspicion is that he committed a few messy murders, somewhere, and came up here where the law couldn't find him. It's a mystery how he ever found that flat in the first place; he had to pickax a trail along a cliff before he could get his horses in.

"The following year, so I heard, Moffitt brought his family here—two girls and three boys. And he went to the land office and filed on the hundred and sixty acres which included the home flat. According to the history given me by a rancher over on the county road, it was in 1890 that the next homesteader located up here. He got burned out twice. But he was a persistent Swede; he started to build his third log cabin, but quit halfway. He simply disappeared. It wasn't till about 1895 that folks began to suspect that Moffitt had killed and buried four homesteaders. The disappearances were too sudden and complete. They still suspect Moffitt, but can't prove anything.

"Moffitt was tricky. When a homesteader came up here, Moffitt would be friendly to his face. Moffitt would pat him on the back, tell him he was glad to see him, that the country needed settlers. He would give helpful advice, would peel off his coat and pitch in with an ax and show the homesteader how to notch the logs for the cabin. Then when the homesteader went to Lanesburg—that's seven miles away, on the county road—for supplies, he would tell what a fine neighbor Moffitt was. It was Moffitt this and Moffitt that—all kinds of praise. Naturally, Moffitt got a good reputation with the outside folks. It was a long time before he got suspected of having something to do with the disappearances. That brings us up to 1895, when three young fellows came up here and filed on three homesteads."

"Did these three disappear?" Newt inquired.

"One of them died. They found his remains in his burned cabin. The other two married the Moffitt girls—one of the girls was sixteen then and the other eighteen. Moffitt staged a double wedding over at Lanesburg."

"Huh!" Newt grinned. "Looks to me like Moffitt was encouraging homesteaders."

"Only these two. He handpicked 'em for his sons-in-law. He was building the clan. These two sons-in-law are named Pipegrass and Dowsett. They now have five sons from sixteen to twenty years old. These lads are tough young hillbillies. There are some daughters, too. One of the Moffitt boys married a girl from down by Valley City, about twelve years ago. He has four children now. They all live over on Moffitt's flat. It's a small village now. None of the kids has ever been to school. All they know about right or wrong or law is what their parents tell them. They've been taught that all of the Red Mountain country belongs to them and that they have a right in the eyes of God—or something like that—to keep homesteaders out."

"How many homesteaders have tried it up here—since 1895?" Newt Lucas inquired.

"Well, up to 1912, not many. Just an occasional one—five or six altogether in seventeen years. All of them gave it up. The clan used what you call the usual tactics."

"Is this all surveyed land?"

"Yes. U.S. survey of 1878."

"Are the blazes and stakes or monuments still in place?"

"Not a one! The clan pulled up every stake, cut down and burned every witness tree—they even burned the stumps completely—and scattered every monument. Why did you ask?"

Newt grinned.

"That's just part of the usual tactics, too. How can homesteaders file, if they can't legally describe the land? How many would-be homesteaders went to the expense of hiring a surveyor?"

"One, in 1911. He brought the county surveyor to shoot a quarter section. This county surveyor had a little run-in with Moffitt while he was working up here. Moffitt made a mistake in trying to bulldoze this surveyor. Moffitt thought he was picking on a sparrow, but it turned out that he was picking on an eagle. This surveyor shot the whole Red Mountain country. He made his own blazes, hid his own stakes, made copious field notes—and then resigned from his job.

"Next, he advertised free land for homesteaders—mostly in the San Francisco newspapers. The land was free, all right, but the surveyor's services were not. He charged three hundred and fifty dollars for locating me on this one hundred and sixty acres."

"A holdup," said Newt. "'Tain't worth it."

"Perhaps not. But he charged eight-hundred dollars for locating two retired school teachers on a homestead about five miles from here."

"Women folks?"

"Yes."

"Why, the such-and-such variety of robber!" yelped Newt. "How could they make a living up here? Two poor old women!"

"Don't worry about them. They're not so old. They have money and brains. They hired men to do the heavy work for them at the start. Now, they wear overalls and do all their own work. They'd surprise you."

"I don't doubt it," said Newt dryly. "But how they gonna make a living?"

"GOATS. Fine imported Swiss milk goats. They have a market at whopping big prices for all the young goats they can raise. Those two women know more about goats than the Swiss do. They milk thirty or forty goats right along, and they're putting money in the bank, above their living expenses, from the sale of the goat cheese they make. And they are located just over the ridge from Lanesburg, not more than two miles from town. No, you needn't worry about the two school teachers who went homesteading. You save your sympathy for the poor devils who came into the heart of the Red Mountain country."

"Yeh, including you," said Newt. "How do you and the rest of the homesteaders expect to make a living up here?"

"Pigs and turkeys. By mutual agreement—even the clan has to subscribe to this because they run more stock than all of us—it's all open range. The pigs run loose and fatten on the acorns. I should have been able to market one hundred and eighty or two hundred shoats this year. But I didn't."

"Why not?"

"Trickery."

"Did they shoot your sows?"

"No; that's a game that we can all play at. So the clan doesn't dare shoot sows—much."

"What happened?"

"Well, there's five other homesteaders, besides me, who ran hogs. Between us, we owned fifteen boars, which were running wild. The clan had more boars scattered over the hills but they drove them all in and sold them. They were all more or less scrub boars. Old Moffitt rode out of here one day with the clan and came back driving a bunch of fine blooded boars. He turned them loose in the hills. Then he rode around and called on all of us homesteaders. He told us that he had spent a lot of money on fine boars and that he didn't want any of his sows bred to our scrub boars. He said that we could have the services of his fine boars and that we'd better round up our scrubs and get rid of them."

"That looks like good business on Moffitt's part," Newt remarked thoughtfully. "But what was the catch in it?"

"Plenty," Meredith answered. "It was too good to be true. But we were blinded by the idea of getting bigger and better shoats. Six of us—all the homesteaders—just busted our necks to round up our scrub boars. We spent almost a week with our saddle horses and our dogs to comb the hills. We drove all the scrub boars over to Lanesburg and shipped them. And most of us spent the cash as soon as we got it. That's the way with homesteading — every time you turn around you discover that you've got to buy something else, if you have the cash."

"Don't be so danged long winded," said Newt impatiently. "This sounds like a new plot to me. What happened after that?"

"Why, the clan quietly went out and drove or tolled every one of their blooded boars home and kept them under pasture. Old Moffitt must have been laughing up his sleeve as he turned his dogs loose to drive our sows away. He opened the gates only to let his own sows get in. We didn't know for a long time that the blooded boars had been taken home. Our sows went barren. And what could we do about it? Instead of being able to market from seventy-five to one hundred shoats at eight dollars or ten dollars each, now, I had to sell some of my brood sows to get cash."

"What could you do about it?" Newt Lucas snorted.

In fact, he even spluttered so much as he uttered the words that he dropped his cigar. He stooped to pick it up, frugally wiped off the wet end on his sleeve and registered satisfaction when he found that it was still usable.

"Listen, son!" he said, leaning forward and tapping on Meredith's knee with a forefinger. "Homesteaders here ain't the same tribe we used to have in Colorado—back in the eighties. Not by a long shot!" One of Newt's eyebrows was now in danger from the glowing end of his cigar, which was held upward between his lips as he puffed vigorously at it. "They've got you buffaloed, huh?"

"No, they haven't!" said Meredith desperately. "But what can I do? I haven't any direct proof."

"Don't make me mad!" Newt snorted.

"That's twice you've asked, 'What can I do about it?' If you say that again I'm plumb liable to get mad—at *you.* This clan thinks it's tough? Huh! A bunch of sneakin' coyotes, danged night ridin' cowards! That's what I calls 'em! Tough? Heh!" Another snort.

"I've seen plenty of 'em what *thought* they was tough. And I've seen 'em cured, plenty, when they met up with some real toughness. This year, I'm sixty-nine years old, son. But I'm not so old at that! Not so old but what I can go out and show this sneakin' clan some points that they never heard of. I've seen 'em before—jest like this Moffitt clan. And I've never seen one of them what wouldn't curl up and pull in its horns and be willin' to set up and be a good dog when it met up with some real toughness. Cowards allus does that. Why, I've got a good notion to go out and—"

NEWT LUCAS ceased talking. He removed his cigar from his mouth in order to listen better. From far up the ridge had come a hail. It was repeated—a loud, drawn out "Waaw-hoooo!"

"That's Hendrickson," Meredith announced. "He's my nearest neighbor. He's homesteading over the ridge on the other creek, nearly two miles from here. He's a bachelor. He used to be a carpenter in San Francisco before he came up here."

Hendrickson presently rode into sight. He tied his saddle horse outside the upper gate and walked down through the yard to where Newt Lucas and Meredith stood waiting. He was a man between forty and forty-five years of age, with the peculiar combination of soft brown eyes and yellow hair. But the gold was leaving his hair; it was turning gray.

"I'm through!" was Hendrickson's abrupt announcement. "I'm going back to San Francisco to work as a carpenter again. It took my last dollar to chip in my share to buy those eleven boars."

"What eleven boars?" Newt demanded, looking at Meredith.

"Oh, I forgot to mention that. The six of us chipped in and bought eleven boars—scrubs—after we found that the clan had pulled in their boars and that all of our sows were barren.

"That was just before Ethel got typhoid. I chipped in almost all the cash I had on hand then."

"You don't know the latest," Hendrickson cut in. "I've got my choice of going to jail for doing what I'd like to do—or of going back to my carpenter work. I don't like jails. So I'm quitting. I know I've got five months' absence due me from my homestead this year, but it'll do me no good. My cabin will be burned while I'm away, and I'd be forced to start all over again when I came back. So I'm not coming back. I know when I've had enough."

"What's the latest?" Meredith inquired.

"Too much. This morning I found three dead boars. They were shot with a .22 some days ago. Since there's three of them that I could find on my way over here, you can bet that every one of our new boars has been fixed. I have fourteen sows, Meredith, and if you're going to stick it out up here you can run my sows on shares—twenty-five per cent. to me, seventy-five per cent. of the increase to you. If there ever is any increase," he added bitterly. "And if you will come over to Lanesburg to get my horse and saddle you can use them. If you want to buy them, I'll sell horse and saddle for thirty dollars. The saddle, alone, cost me more than forty dollars."

"Looky here," Newt broke in. "Is there really any money in raising pigs?"

"There is—or should be," Hendrickson replied, looking inquiringly at Newt and then at Meredith.

"Hendrickson," said Meredith, "shake hands with my wife's uncle, Mr. Lucas."

"Glad to meetchuh," said Newt. "Have a seegar—have two seegars. I get 'em wholesale."

"Thanks," said Hendrickson. "Homesteaders in this country are lucky to get any cigars at all."

"Now," said Newt, after pressing several cigars into the hands of the two men and lighting a fresh one for himself, "I want some facts and figgers on this here pig raising business. About all I know about pigs is that they're danged fine—when cured, sliced and fried along with some aigs. I know all about that end of the business; ham or bacon with aigs is one of my standbys. While you're here, Mr. Hendrickson, you kin gimme some facts and figgers. I kin git more later from the lad, here." Newt jerked a thumb toward Meredith. "I can't see how in hell you expect to make a living offa fourteen sows."

"It could be done, very easily," said Hendrickson. "This is good pig country—plenty of feed and no diseases. If a man can raise a little alfalfa patch and a little corn he won't have to buy any feed at all. The sows usually have two litters a year—but of course you know all about that."

"I don't," said Newt. "I thought they was like a cow. Cows is all I know about—and I never milked one in my life. Do they have one calf, jest like a cow—or are they like rabbits?"

"A sow has anywhere from seven to fifteen in a litter. Ten is a good average."

"And they have 'em twice a year?" Newt inquired.

"Most of them do—or should."

"That's fine!" Newt said. "I kin see right now that there ain't gonna be no shortage of what I likes with my aigs. But I had an idea that pigs was always kept in pig pens. How come that they run wild?"

"We don't let them run wild, exactly. We only turn them loose to clean up the thousands of acres of acorns in these hills and to run on the unfenced pasturage. That saves about ninety-nine per cent. of what would be expense of feeding them. When we drive in some shoats or barrows to sell they represent almost pure profit. The trouble is that, this year, we have no shoats to sell."

"Uh!" said Newt, after some rapid puffing on his cigar. "It seems to figger that out of fourteen sows a man might be able to make more than a hundred dollars a month."

"More than that—on paper," Hendrickson answered. "But not in these hills."

"That's too danged much for a homesteader." Newt grinned. "In my time, a homesteader who ever got one hundred dollars cash would be looked at kinda suspicious-like. Folks would think that he'd held up a train, or something. Or that he'd marketed a lot of slow elk that didn't belong to him to a mine commissary.

"Yep," Newt continued, "homesteaders sure gits pampered these days. No rent to pay, no taxes, no water bills, no fuel bills—he's better off than he'd be if he was living in town. And he works so hard all day that he doesn't burn any lamps, much, at night. All he has to do is to pick out some hole in the hills, stick his lifetime savings into improving a homestead, then almost starve to death—and finally quit and go back to his job. Yep, he finally quits because he loses everything except his appetite, or gits shot, or burned out, or scared out."

NEWT appeared to be enjoying himself. And he had a joke, or something, up his sleeve, for his eyes twinkled occasionally with a light that might be described as fiendish glee. He glanced around the clearing and then turned to Meredith.

"How come that somebody ain't dropped a match down along the creek somewhere? This whole mountain side would go *swoosh!* Your place here is just made to order to git cleaned out by a brush fire."

"The clan tried that trick on a homesteader—once," said Meredith. "You can see traces of that fire yet. It burned out the whole Red Mountain country; it never stopped until it reached Eel River. The front of the fire was ten or eleven miles wide when it got to the river. I am told that Moffitt had to backfire in order to save his own buildings, for the fire crept back, jumped the creek and started swooping the other way. The clan got cured of that. They lost a lot of hogs and there was no feed left for the rest of their stock. So, if the clan tries any more burning of cabins, they'll touch them off direct—and do it in winter when the fire won't spread. Why, right up on the mesa, over the ridge here, there's over a thousand acres of open pasture. The clan runs seventy or eighty head of cattle on it."

"Don't any other homesteaders run cattle?" Newt inquired.

"No. The clan won't let them. One homesteader had two cows. They strayed up on the Moffitt range, and never came back. They disappeared completely. There's no direct proof against the clan, only a lot of suspicion. Jimmy Pierce—he's homesteading over the ridge across the creek—has a cow now. He needs milk for his two babies. He rides herd on his one cow or stakes it out so it won't stray."

"Well," said Hendrickson, "I've got to go. Do you want to run my hogs on shares? And do you want to buy this horse?"

"I'll take over your sows," said Meredith, "but I can't buy your horse. I'm in the hole now and don't know when I'll ever get cash enough to crawl out."

"You've got it right now, son," Newt drawled. "Jest wait a minute. You, too, Hendrickson!"

Newt pulled a folded sheaf of currency from a hip pocket. He smoothed out the wad of bills. The five twenties that he peeled from it seemed to make no difference in its size. It was a fat sheaf.

"There's one hundred dollars," Newt said as he held the money at arm's length toward Hendrickson. "Take it."

"For what?" Hendrickson asked.

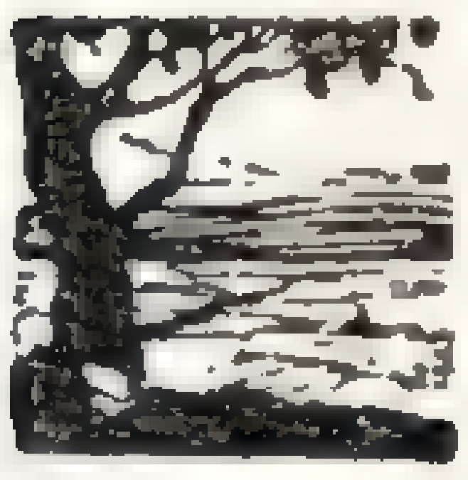
"For a loan," said Newt. "A grubstake. You ain't quittin' this country—not with them fine blooded boars of Moffitt's due right soon to be turned loose again in these hills. You kin pay this back after you git cash from selling the first litter from your fourteen sows. I got an idea that you'll git more cash from the next litter than you ever got for any. You'll git dividends from them blooded boars."

"It'll be nearly a year before I'll have pigs big enough to sell," said Hendrickson slowly. "I've thought it over carefully and it's that year to wait that has me licked and making me quit. Besides, Mr. Lucas, how do you know that the clan will turn loose their boars?"

"I know it!" Newt snapped. "Ain't that enough? Ain't I proving it by handing you cash to buy grub to keep you eating regularly? Shucks! Here's another hundred, jest to prove it some more. Don't gawk at me that way. Take the money, dang you! There's lots more where that come from. Here you're trying to keep me from gittin' some pleasure out of staking a homesteader. I won't miss this money even if you're never able to pay it back. Without even working for it, I now got more than a thousand dollars a month dropping into my pocket. I could have spent that much awful easy when I was young, but now I don't drink so much and I play a better game of poker; and, why, there's some months now when I can't even begin to make a dent in the thousand.

"Furthermore," Newt continued, "I'm right selfish in handing you this cash. You got no idea how much pleasure it's giving me to be able to do it. Times were right hard when I was a homesteader and cash was awful scarce. But there was nobody trying to stake me. I was nesting in cow country. I had five scrub cows that I had a bill of sale for, because I worked as a cowboy during roundups and took my wages out in cows. They was good cows, too. Four of them had twins and the other one had triplets." A reminiscent grin lighted the old man's face.

"Yeh, I might have worked up to be a cattle king, but the big outfits around me got suspicious when my cows began to have litters—so to speak—jest like pigs. But I was young in them days and took a chance. I was too danged ambitious, and the old-timers worked on me jest like the clan is working on you boys. They'd have stretched my neck if they could have proved their suspicions and if they could have caught me . . ." Newt added with a grin. "What gimme a big laugh today was that the lad here met me with a rifle jest like I used to meet anybody who tried to visit me when I was homesteading. I used to sneak out and meet callers right where they didn't want to be met. Many's the night that I took blankets and slept in the brush alongside the trail over the ridge from my dugout, jest so's I could stop night ridin' callers at a place where I'd have the bulge on 'em and play with them by my own rules. I was pretty salty in them days; I sure stopped and discouraged 'em. But I lost a lot of sleep doing it. This losing sleep got to be such a regular thing that I got the idea that maybe my neighbors didn't like me.



"SO I packed my stuff, finally, on a horse and drove my five cows and eleven yearlings out of the country. I went down into Colorado and picked me out another homestead. The land office never got wise that I'd already used up my homestead rights. There was lots of land offices in them days. I used my full name of Newton Culpepper Lucas which I hadn't used the first time, and started homesteading all over again. I used up my beeves in gittin' an education—in draw poker. But I stayed strictly honest. And what did it git me? Nothin'!

"I'd git a little playful with my Colt in them days when I got a few drinks in me. The whole danged country was gitting so civilized that bimeby they began to issue warrants for me. Heh! They sent depity sheriffs to serve them warrants. I got me a whole collection of depity badges and stars and guns and had the whole place looking like it had snowed because of the warrants I tore up. Then I killed a bad *hombre*, called Killer Kelly, who'd bumped off a friend of mine. That was the time a whole posse was after me. A Republican posse. This Killer Kelly had been rung in as a depity. I was an unterrified Democrat in them days, and no Republican posse could take me.

"They didn't take me—uh-uh! But there was two companies of militia, with a cannon, going on a practise march. And danged if they didn't send the militia to practise on me. That's why I quit homesteading for the second time. I got the idea that, maybe, I wasn't cut out to be a homesteader. So I never tried it again. I always wanted to try it, but finally I got too old. I'm sixty-nine now—but I'm not so old at that! My hunch to come up here and visit my only living relative has sort of renewed my youth. The situation here is old stuff to me—it's sort of amusing. Most things ain't amusing any more. I ain't had an attack of playfulness for more than twenty years, but I feel one coming over me now. It's going to help to renew my youth.

"Now, Hendrickson, you ain't going to make me feel badly by refusing to take this money, are you? I want the pleasure of doing to a homesteader the same thing that I used to wish that somebody would do to me when I was homesteading. And remember that the Moffitts are going to turn loose them blooded boars."

"I'll gladly take the money as a loan," said Hendrickson. "I hated to admit that the clan had licked me, but couldn't see anything else to do except to quit."

"Why in hell didn't you put up a fight?" Newt demanded.

"Because I don't want to go to jail, with the cards stacked against me," Hendrickson replied. "The Moffitts would have the infernal nerve to swear out warrants for all the homesteaders up here. One of the Moffitt boys married the daughter of the man who is now the justice of the peace at Lanesburg. This Judge Heckledorff doesn't know much more about law than a pig does about the Fourth of July. He'd ladle out a six months' sentence to me or any of us just because Moffitt told him to. I got warned on the Q. T. by a storekeeper in Lanesburg that Moffitt was going to try to frame us. We wouldn't have a chance—with the whole clan perjuring themselves in order to get rid of us. None of us has money enough to hire an attorney—and what good would an attorney do us, anyway?"

"I kin see plainly right now," said Newt, smiling broadly, "that maybe I'd better go over and git playful with this Judge Heckledorff. I'm an unterrified Democrat when I git playful. The trouble is after I play once with folks they don't want to play with me any more. They always want to shoot me or do something like that what ain't in the rules as I wrote 'em."

"Mr. Lucas, you're sure a card!" said Hendrickson admiringly. "That shine of devilment in your eyes kind of makes me grin all over inside. I don't know what you're going to do, but I'll bet that you do it. I'd like to string along with you and help you do it."

"Thank you, suh!" said Newt, grinning. "If I'm a card, I'm the joker—wild. You can't help me because you live here. Everybody probably knows you, and that fact will spoil the effect. The joker, wild, is the uncertain element. Folks will respect it. I'll sure make 'em respect it. And you'd be only little casino. The biggest help you kin give me is to cultivate a bad memory."

"In what way?"

"By forgitting that you ever saw me. I kin have my fun by gitting playful and leave a beautiful, lasting memory behind me by disappearing completely. Folks will keep the joker in mind, and respect it. Now, I got only two questions to ask. Does this Judge Heckledorff or any of the clan ever play poker?"

"I don't know," said Meredith.

"If they do, it would be penny ante," said Hendrickson.

"Fine!" said Newt. "Penny ante players can be bluffed in a big game. My second question is: Have you ever heard of a depity United States marshal ever being in these parts?"

Both homesteaders agreed in the answer that they had never heard of one's even being in the county.

"Don't ask questions, then," said Newt. "Both of you jest forgit that you ever saw me. I bought a horse and saddle down in Valley City. I told nobody where I was going. I asked directions from nobody as to how to git up here. Ethel wrote me long letters. She described things. I jest pieced things together, rode to Lanesburg and took the trail up here. I turned off at the place Ethel described. So nobody but you two boys knows that I'm here. I'll sort of renew my youth by gitting playful with the clan. They may think that I play rough, but they'll never be the same again. And the hardest part that you two boys is to take in my playing is to forgit that you ever saw me.

"Now, Mr. Hendrickson, you light a shuck out of here for Lanesburg. Git yourself a load of staple and fancy groceries, so's you kin eat regular. I believe that homesteaders ought to eat regular. It's good for 'em! I kin remember when I was homesteading and the meals began to git skimpy and not so often. I kin see that my visit here is going to renew my youth.

"Jest remember that there's more cash for groceries a-coming when you need it. I'm going to fix it up with the lad, here, to stake all the homesteaders around here so's they kin eat regular and not weaken till the pig raising business gits to be what it ought to be. It looks to me like there's money in raising pigs—when you don't have to buy much feed for 'em. I'm plumb liable to invest in a hundred thoroughbred sows, to run with the clan's good boars, and let you homesteaders take care of them for me on shares. I'm a business man, I am."

"Gosh! I'd sure like to take over half of them, Mr. Lucas," said Hendrickson eagerly.

"We'll see about that," said Newt. "Your main business right now is to git some groceries at Lanesburg. You git me two boxes of .44-40 shells while you're there. Yeh, and git me a full quart of good old whisky; I've got to renew my youth. Wa-a-it a minute—" Newt picked up Meredith's carbine.

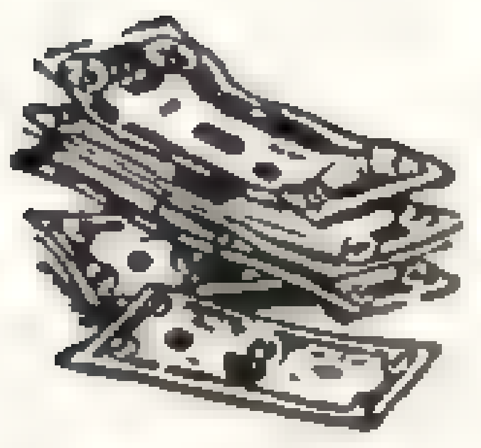
".30-30, eh? A danged little pea shooter, but it's danged deadly, at that. How many shells you got for it, lad?"

"Only eight," said Meredith. "I just couldn't afford another box."

"Git two boxes of .30-30's, too," said Newt to Hendrickson.

"You betchuh!" said Hendrickson. "So long!"

He went out toward his horse.



A LITTLE later Newt again pulled out the sheaf of currency. He separated the bills into two approximate halves. He pocketed one and laid the other on the table.

"There's been too danged many arguments around here already," said Newt. "Don't you start any. You take that cash and hustle right down and see how Ethel is gitting along. Pay up them hospital bills. I got my will all drawed up, leavin' everything I got to Ethel, and this is jest some cash in advance. Don't you worry none or argue about it!"

"I won't," said Meredith. "It's a godsend to me. I was worried sick about being broke."

"Being broke never made me sick. Sometimes it got a mite embarrassing after I'd missed a few meals, but even that never worried me much. I reckon it's a lot tougher to be broke when you're a married man. Yep, I reckon it sure is. I noticed, son, that you looked plumb surprised when I pulled out a little ready cash. Maybe you're wondering how I got it?"

"Not exactly. But now I'm a little curious, I'll admit. Maybe you own an oil well."

"Naw! I own a lot of responsibilities," sighed Newt. "I ain't dared to be playful for a long time, either. I used to have a good time once in a while before I was fifty. After Mosby's guerillas busted up, I never surrendered. I went out West—and I put in thirty years of meaning danged well, but mostly gitting misunderstood. I was a danged good cowboy, a tophand, but, somehow, all the way from Texas to Idaho, folks would misunderstand me when I got playful after a pay day. Poker was my weakness. I put in thirty years trying to learn the game. I'd always lose, in the end.

"I went broke one night in Omaha, after arriving there as a hay forker for a trainload of beeves. One of the boys staked me to a couple of drinks and breakfast. I remembered then that it was my birthday. I was fifty years old. I shoved my hands down in my overall pockets and felt something in one of them. I thought it was a nickel. I was going into a saloon to spend the nickel for beer when I pulled the coin out to look at it to be sure. And, so help me, it was a five-dollar gold piece!

"I thought it was too early for a poker game to be going, but I found one next door in the back of a cigar store. It had been running all night. I bought a stack with the five dollars and sat down to lose it. And, so help me, I couldn't lose! The bad luck of thirty years was doing a complete back flop and using spurs on itself. In the middle of the afternoon, I had a bill of sale for the cigar store. I paid twelve hundred dollars for it, which was more than it was worth then. Benny Robertson, the man who had owned the store, still had a few hundred left when the game finally broke up.

"And there I was—with the cowboy's dream realized. No more dust and sweat, no more long, hard, cold, wet hours of work. Restaurant cooking three times a day, and a saloon next door. And I could play poker twenty-four hours a day, every day, if I could stand it. I stood it for about two months. I got danged tired of restaurant cooking and poker playing. And then Benny Robertson come back. He was broke. I hired him to run the store for me.

"And then one of my old bunkhouse friends showed up. He had just got out of a hospital. He was all crippled and could never fork a horse again. He wanted to borrow a few dollars. Shucks! I had money in the bank—mostly winnings at poker. So I just up and bought a good uptown cigar store and put this crippled cowboy in charge of it. I put it up to him to make or break himself in running it. I was already broke, from buying the store. I went back to the range, to git back the appetite for sowbelly, beans, biscuits, prunes and coffee which was coffee—the strong, black kind that you can't git in town.

"But the old range chuck didn't taste so awful good any more. It got plumb unappetizing after a couple of weeks of the same thing. And my layoff had softened me up. I got saddle sore and my joints creaked a little. I toughened up and stuck it out till after the fall roundup. Then I went back to Omaha to see if the sheriff had closed up the store that I'd turned over to the crippled lad." Newt paused to chuckle.

"Sheriff? Haw-haw-haw! The store had picked up a lot of trade. Everybody liked the lad. Instead of having lost the store, the lad had paid cash for a lot of new stock, had paid himself his wages regular and had put nine hundred dollars cash in the bank for me. So I raised the lad's wages and told him to go ahead with his idea and hire a cigar maker to turn out a good five cent cigar that hit a cowboy's taste in cigars—whenever they smoked cigars, which they did mostly to show off. The lad got a printer to make wrappers with the picture of a steer on them. He's got three cigar makers working now to make them.

"Then I met up with an old range cook that I used to like. He was gitting old, so that gitting up at three o'clock in the morning was gitting kind of hard for him. There was a little restaurant for sale for eight hundred dollars. So I took the profits that the lad had made for me in the cigar store, bought the restaurant and put the old cook in to run it.

"And that's the way it went. There was an old foreman who once promoted me to be range boss. The ranch where he'd worked for over thirty years had changed hands, and he lost his job. I bought a livery stable and put him in to run it for me. I bought a barber shop for a lad who'd once cut my hair in a bunkhouse. And there's a harness and saddle store that I put another man in charge of. And the pool hall. And two more cigar stores. Why, it got so that I finally jerked Benny Robertson out of that first cigar store and put him to work as a traveling foreman to make the rounds and bank the cash from all them businesses that I own."

"Why, Uncle Newt," said Meredith, "you were a real philanthropist."

"PHILANTHROPIST, hell!" spat Newt. "Every danged one of them businesses is making money for me. Some of them don't make so much—but every danged one shows a profit. Some of them businesses was jest little holes in the wall when I bought them. You ought to see them now. They're fine big stores and places. The one I like the best is the livery stable. I git a saddle horse out of it mostly every day I'm in Omaha and take a ride, jest to keep the oil in my joints. But the livery business ain't what it used to be. Next year that stable will maybe show a loss; them automobiles has cut the trade down to next to nawthing. I figger that to keep that stable going I'd better buy a garage to go with it."

Newt pulled out an expensive watch and looked at it.

"Cripes! How I've rambled on. You grab that money, son, and skedaddle down to see Ethel. Say, how often does any of the clan ride the range?"

"Every day. One or two or three of them are always snooting around."

"That's fine," said Newt. "You git back here by noon tomorrow. I figger that'll be in plenty of time for you to git arrested."

"Get arrested?" Meredith inquired doubtfully.

"Sure," grinned Newt. "If the clan has the idea that it can harass you homesteaders by gitting you arrested, the best thing for us to do is to raise so heavy before the draw that they won't stay in the pot on a four flush. Hendrickson said he got warned that the clan was going to frame the homesteaders. Heh-heh!" chuckled Newt. "We'll sure bluff 'em out before the draw!" He stopped to light another cigar.

"Yeh, son," he resumed, after the cigar was drawing well, "if I got real playful I'd jest natch'ly go over and chase the whole danged clan into gopher holes. Yeh, all by myself!" he snorted in answer to the dubious look. "I ain't so old at that!" He glared as though challenging Meredith to argue.

Meredith smiled at the frown.

"Would you mind spending one night in jail?" Newt inquired abruptly.

Meredith, at first, did not relish the idea. But he thought of the roll of bills in his pocket, the cash that had lifted a heavy load of haunting worry. He kept thinking of that comforting wad of currency. He had not counted it yet, but he knew that it was a larger amount than he had ever expected to have at one time. He was absolutely baffled by the impish gleam of amusement in Newt's strangely youthful eyes.

"I'll tell you how it is, Uncle Newt," he said slowly. "I took your money, gladly. I think that you have saved me from going crazy. That's how worried I was—about Ethel, and everything. If you wanted me to spend a month in jail, I'd take your word for it—and do it."

"Good boy!" said Newt. "Now, if you took one of them automobile stages that I saw running on the county road, could you git down to Valley City before three o'clock?"

"I could. I can catch the 2:10 at Lanesburg."

"Do it," said Newt. "When you git to the county seat, you find yourself a bright young lawyer. You take him with you and do about half an hour's visiting and quick shopping. Start a small savings account at one of the banks. The banks, I reckon, close at three o'clock. Git to one first. If the sheriff is in town, drop in and tell him about the eleven boars being shot. He won't be able to do anything about it, but tell him, anyway. And ask him what time it is. Ask him twice. If the district attorney ain't in court, go and see him, too. Buy a box of shells in one place, and insist upon gitting the correct time. Then go buy some flowers to take to Ethel. Have that young lawyer along with you all the time. Tell him to make a note of everybody you see and chew the rag with, and everybody you buy something from.

"You might tell the young lawyer that something might be busting loose up in the hills, and that you're establishing a danged good alibi. He'll lick his chops at that—and help you plenty. He'll help you make a case that will be a lawyer's dream of heaven. Promise him one hundred dollars, and give him fifty dollars in advance. Them young lawyers is mostly broke all the time."

Newt's cigar had gone out. He paused to touch a match to it.

"What's the idea of all this, Uncle Newt?"

"It's old stuff. It ain't putting any strain on my imagination," said Newt, puffing away.

"That isn't answering my question."

"I ain't going to answer it, son. I jest want to see if you'll take my word for things. Kin you remember all I told you?"

"Every word. You've got me curious."

"Shucks! I aim to make the clan look that way. Now you hit the breeze out of here. You ride *my* horse, savvy, and leave that one of yours here. Jest be sure to pick yourself a smart, slick lawyer. Him and me will do the rest. Git! Skedaddle, so's you kin catch that stage."

Meredith started away.

"You'd better take the first stage that leaves Valley City in the morning," Newt called after him. "Come to think of it, maybe the earlier you git back here the better. *And don't come down your trail from the ridge trail!* Stay off the trail! Cut down here through the woods and brush, if you kin. If you can't, jest tie my horse somewheres off the trail where it won't be seen, and come down on foot. I'll git the horse later." Newt had walked out to where Meredith had stopped.

"Say, kin you leave your horse somewheres with a friend jest outside of Lanesburg? Livery stables is too public."

"I can—easily."

"Do it. And if you kin git on that stage and off it again without nobody in Lanesburg seeing you, it'll be all the better."

"I think I can do that, too. I don't know what it's all about, Uncle Newt, but I'll try to follow your instructions."

"I know what it's all about," said Newt, "and I feel sorry for myself."

"Why?"

"Because I've cooked up such a slick scheme that it'll cheat me out of half the fun I thought I was going to have. But never mind that. Git a-going son—and good luck!"

NEWT watched Meredith depart on the Valley City horse. Then he returned to the kitchen, where he had previously deposited a pair of saddlebags. From the latter he pulled forth a cartridge belt and a holster which held a worn old single action .44-40 Colt revolver with a six-inch barrel. He laid these on the kitchen table, then fished among his scant baggage until he found what looked like the remnant of a bar of soap.

It was one of Newt's most cherished possessions, not for its value as soap, but for what it contained or concealed. Newt had cherished that bar of soap for more than thirty years. It had once been white soap, sort of soft. Now it was yellowish, dried hard to the point of brittleness and filled with black streaks where dust and grime had entered the myriad cracks and finally had amalgamated themselves as part of the soap. And Newt had several times been forced to soak the bar for a minute or two in water and then press the edges of the cracks down upon themselves in order to prevent the widening cracks from revealing what the soap concealed.

This bar of soap contained or concealed what Newt regarded as a trophy of the chase. This definition had reverse English on it, for, at the time, Newt had been the one who had been chased. No less than a United States marshal—not a deputy—had been on Newt's trail until Newt got tired of it. With a few drinks tucked beneath his belt, Newt had felt playful. So he had stalked the marshal and caught him cold. The only injury inflicted had been to the officer's pride. As Newt had put it at the time, "He wasn't much of a marshal, anyway; he only thought he was."

But after gaining the trophy of the chase and leaving the marshal afoot, Newt had been careful to leave the corner of one Territory and the breadth of one State between himself and the spot where he had been playful with the marshal. And he had been canny enough to conceal his trophy in the bar of soap, for life and liberty had been more or less uncertain in those days; it would have been embarrassing, if arrested for some minor offense, to have a county officer search him, discover the trophy and inquire about it.

But now in Meredith's kitchen, Newt broke apart the brittle bar of soap and brought to light a small gold badge. He found a toothbrush and used it to polish the shield to its original luster. He wondered if gold shields were out of date, but decided to take a chance. In this county, United States marshals were a rarity, not a nuisance.

He used a jackknife to cut a long slit behind his coat lapel, then pinned the shield to the lining inside the lapel. He patted the outside of the lapel and was satisfied that, in the event he got into trouble and was searched, the illicit shield would in all likelihood not be discovered.

He eyed the worn gunbelt and holster longingly, but decided that it would not do. Packing a gun openly on the thigh was not being done—much. Times had changed. So he dug from a saddlebag a nearly new armpit holster. For a time he looked sourly at it, heaved a big sigh and decided that he would wear it. The next thirty or forty minutes were devoted to profane words and experiments with the armpit holster. He tried it outside his vest, beneath his vest, and finally removed his shirt. The trouble was with his vest; it had been tailor made, and there had been no allowance in the fitting for a large Colt to be buttoned beneath it. Newt finally grunted his dissatisfaction.

By leaving his vest unbuttoned and two shirt buttons open he could reach in and get the gun. The main thing was that this arrangement was the only one that absolutely concealed the harness. And he spent quite a while practising and experimenting in getting that Colt in the quickest way from beneath his left armpit. He continued to practise until he heard Hendrickson shout from some point up the trail.

Hendrickson was grinning as he entered the yard.

"I met Meredith just this side of Lanesburg," he said. "It did my heart good to see that he looked almost happy; he hasn't looked that way for a long time."

"You jest forgit how he looked. You forgit that you ever saw him on the trail. And most of all you've gotta forgit that you ever saw *me*. Gimme them things you bought for me, then go home. Stay there and practise forgitting."

HENDRICKSON finally departed. Newt then removed the heavy wrapping of newspaper from the bottle of whisky.

"Green River," he murmured. "'Tain't a brand that I favor, but it'll do—it'll do. Maybe I'd ought to 'a' give a drink to Hendrickson, but I don't feel convivial. And this whisky is for business, not for pleasure."

Newt removed the cork and took a swig directly from the bottle.

"So this clan is real tough, hey?" he said aloud. "They kill homesteaders and burn them out, hey?" Newt sampled the bottle again. "So they poison dawgs and pollute springs, hey?" Newt took a drink bigger than either of the other two. "And they trick the poor homesteaders and then shoot eleven boars to starve out the poor homesteaders, hey? And they're goin' to frame the homesteaders and send 'em to jail, hey?" Newt seemed to like the sound of his own voice.

Newt was not working himself into a rage; on the contrary, now, inside and out, he was grinning broadly. The grin on his face was visible. The inward grin popped the safety valve with a series of chuckles. He squinted appraisingly at the bottle and then judiciously proceeded to lower its contents by about one-quarter of an inch.

"Dang it!" he exclaimed finally. "I sure got a swift rush of brains to the head. Too danged swift! I betcha I've cheated myself out of a lot of fun. All I kin see to do now is to go out and destroy some property. If them boys has lied to me, I'll jest up and pay for my fun out of my own pocket. You betcha! But they ain't lied—" Newt chuckled again.

"Why," he continued his soliloquy, "I never in my life see a pair of boys who was so harassed and plumb disgusted. This Hendrickson lad was ready to quit. He was on his way out of here for keeps. He sure was! And this Meredith boy—heh-heh! Danged lucky for the only living male relative that I got—by marriage—that I come along. You betcha. That boy was all primed to go out and make hisself the defendant in a murder case. A nice necessary homicide ain't what it used to be; homicides git investigated too danged much, nowadays.

"Now take this clan," Newt continued. "S'posin' I was the sheriff of this county. S'posin' I got word that somebody had bumped off one of this clan. And me knowin' the facts as I know 'em now, what would I do about it? I reckon that I'd say I was sorry that I couldn't do anything about it. I'd say that I had no authority to pay a bounty for a clan scalp. Then I'd go back to the pedro game that would be running in the jailer's office. That's what *I'd* do. That's what any sheriff with a reasonable viewpoint would do. But I ain't got acquainted with the sheriff in these parts—yet," he added with a grin. "He might be a danged fool who takes himself too seriously. He might be ambitious instead of reasonable. Them kind of sheriffs usually ain't got no sense of humor. And them sheriffs who can't laugh used to be my meat when I got playful in my youth, so to speak."

Presently Newt went to look at Meredith's horse. He saw that it was shod only on the front feet. He eased up to the horse and in turn lifted each front hoof to examine the shoes. They needed resetting; the hoof walls had grown too long. He lifted a hind foot. It was obvious that the rear shoes had been removed very recently, evidently to allow the hoof walls to wear down. Newt shook his head sadly; he loved horses, and regarded Meredith's treatment of the hoofs on this horse as being very careless and slovenly.

There had been method in Newt's thus examining the hoofs. There was more method in his finally removing one of the front shoes with the aid of an inadequate pair of farriers' nippers and a claw hammer—the only tools he could find.

Newt grinned.

"A hoss on three stilts and one shoe," he murmured. "That ought to be plain enough for anybody to read. I'm sure helpin' out the clan. Heh-heh!"

To help out the clan some more, as he put it, he took an ax, went out through the lower gate and returned finally with an armful of *manzanita* branches. He tied a rope around these branches and carried the bundle across the saddlehorn a little later when he rode through the upper gate. When a few yards up the trail, he lowered the bundle of twigs to the ground and allowed it to drag along at the end of the rope, a dozen feet behind the horse. He rode uphill until he reached the main trail at the top of the ridge. The bundle of twigs, bouncing and dragging at the end of the rope, had been a crude broom, sweeping dust into most of the distinct hoof marks on the trail to Meredith's homestead. Newt turned the horse and rode down the trail, to repeat the sweeping process.

He chuckled sourly as he rode, the blunt truth being that he did not think much of his own tactics; he regarded the trail sweeping as being very crude indeed. But he thought that the clan's methods also were crude; his opinion of the combined brains of the clan was very low, therefore he lowered himself to what he considered to be the mental level of the clan. Newt was only making absolutely certain that he would be able to leave hoofprints that a three year old child could positively identify.

TLATE in the afternoon, Newt took the .30-30 carbine, climbed a bit unsteadily into the saddle and again rode up the trail. The slight unsteadiness undoubtedly can be attributed to the unusual amount of whisky he had consumed. He had not been getting drunk; he had been renewing his youth, or at least seeking to acquire a reckless state of mind. Once in the saddle, he automatically became a part of the horse, or as much so as a good rider can be.

He turned and looked back at the distinct hoofprints on the clean trail. He grinned and murmured:

"Newt, you can't deny it; you're sure lettin' old age creep up on you. Twenty years ago, you'd rather be doin' what you're gonna do than git drunk. And now, you have to git drunk in order to do what you're gonna do. But you're sure gonna do it, Newt. Remember that you was a homesteader once, yourself."

Presently he arrived at the summit and rode down through the brush until he came to the open pasture that had been described to him. It was a halfmoon mesa bench, part way down the mountain side, filling completely across the chord where the ridge curved in a semicircle. It was perhaps three miles along the straight edge of the bench to where the grass-lands again merged with the brushy mountain side. The large bench was not level and flat; it consisted of a series of low rolling hills, with a water worn, V shaped, shallow ravine in each hollow. Here and there on the hillsides Newt saw small groups of grazing cattle.

He allowed his horse to amble along toward them. From the top of the first rolling hill he saw a patch of willow and alder trees—a sure sign of never failing water. Nearby stood a neglected, deserted, small log cabin. He rode down to it and looked it over. In size it was about seven feet by nine. The slightly sloped, almost flat roof had been fashioned of crude fir shakes nailed to slim fir poles. In places the nails had rusted and the shakes had blown off. The one window was an opening perhaps twelve inches square, and there was no indication that it had ever been glazed. The low door, from which the top hinge of leather had rotted away, now lay on the ground. It had been made of two boards, each eight inches in width.

Newt looked through the narrow, low doorway and saw that the floor of the cabin was of earth. He dismounted and stepped inside. At the lower end of the roof the wall was not quite six feet high.

"Huh!" Newt snorted. "They swore that this was a habitable house—and they got away with it. It's a cinch that no land office inspector ever came up here to check up on the alleged improvements."

Back in the nineties one of Moffitt's sons-in-law had filed on one hundred and sixty acres which surrounded the only source of water on the bench. He had proved up on this homestead, and this ownership of the waterhole sufficed for the clan to regard the remaining eight or nine hundred acres of good pasture as its exclusive property. This doubtful title was enforced by the simple process of shooting any cow not bearing the clan's brand which strayed on to the bench. The eight or nine hundred acres to which the clan had no title was Government land, supposedly open to homesteading.

In reality, the clan's powder and lead title bade fair to stand secure so far as homesteaders were concerned; the lack of water on the rest of the bench prevented homesteading.

It may be interpolated here that some two years later the Government corrected to some extent this universal condition by the Stock Raising Act of 1916, entitling a homesteader to six hundred and forty acres, not necessarily contiguous.

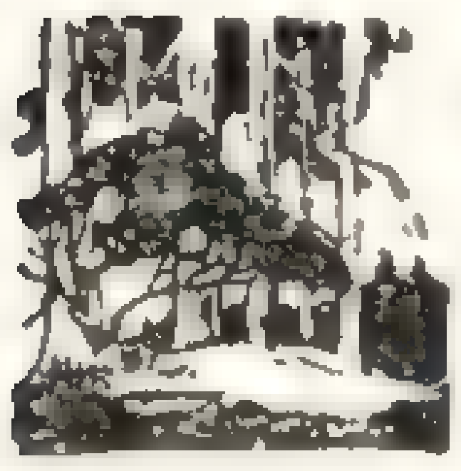
Newt rode to the summit of the mountain ridge, from where he could see the entire bench. He could have counted every head of stock without moving from this vantage point. But he was interested only in making sure that none of the clan was in sight. None was. The only living creatures on the bench were the grazing cattle.

Dismounting, Newt climbed a few feet higher to where he could survey the terrain on the other side of the summit. Far below, on the opposite side of Mink Creek, two thin columns of smoke climbed skyward. At the base of these, unpainted buildings and fenced flats told Newt that he was looking down into the clan's stronghold. In an air line, it was perhaps anywhere from three-fourths to a full mile to the buildings. Undoubtedly it would be two or three miles by trail, for the side of the ridge below Newt was rough and steep.

Newt mounted again and rode back to the bench. A young Hereford bull had come out of the willows in the swale near the alleged homestead shack. It stood its ground, acting mildly belligerent, as Newt approached. Newt drew the carbine from the saddle boot and from a range of a few yards shot the bull through the brain. It was literally a bull's eye shot, for the bullet had hit the target and the target had been the bull's left eye.

In quick succession, Newt shot two cows—dropping them within a few rods of the dead bull. Then he urged the horse into a gallop, headed a fleeing cow, chased her back to the swale and shot her. It took him perhaps ten minutes to round up seven more cows, drive them to where he wanted them and drop each with a well placed bullet. On some he did an excellent imitation of the Indian method of killing buffaloes—by galloping to the flank of a fleeing cow and sending a bullet in behind a fore shoulder to reach the heart.

"Eleven boars—eleven cows!" Newt murmured aloud, as he pulled up his panting horse and turned to survey his handiwork. "That's a lesson in arithmetic for the clan. And I betcha that Bill Cody couldn't beat that job for neatness. I laid 'em all down inside of half an acre by anybody's watch."



HE REMOVED the tattered, soft black hat of Meredith's that he had cannily borrowed. He absently mopped his brow as he continued to gaze.

"It sure helped to renew my youth," he continued. "I think I done right; but if I done wrong I'm sure willing to pay for my fun by pungling up handsome for them cows. Yep! I sure am! It all depends on the clan's next move."

He replaced the hat and picked up the carbine which during his soliloquy had rested across the saddle in front of his thighs. It was obvious that his respect for the "peashooter" had gone up several notches.

"Yep," he continued aloud, "she's sure deadly—at close range, anyway. Wonder how far the danged thing will shoot. There's nothing easier than to try to find out."

He rode again to the summit, dismounted and crouched behind the same rock that had been his shelter when he had looked down upon the clan's stronghold a short time before. Beyond the two columns of smoke, beyond the buildings and the fenced pastures a red cliff towered for several hundred feet. This nearly perpendicular cliff was perhaps half a mile in length and was part of the base of Red Mountain, which arose beyond. The pasture fences terminated at the foot of the cliff.

And now old Newt Lucas started to shoot at the cliff, hoping to be able to see by puffs of red dust where the bullets struck. Newt regarded this action as being purely a scientific experiment—to discover just how far a .30-30 carbine would "carry up", as he put it. It may or may not have been coincidence that the spot which Newt picked as a target on the face of the cliff was directly between the two columns of smoke. The cliff was more than a mile distant. The spot at which he aimed was not very high up, either. The first bullet dropped far short, kicking up a spurt of dust in the open space between two log cabins. The second bullet hit within ten feet of the same spot. Newt grinned as he conscientiously kept the same elevation as he carefully lined the sights on the cliff target before each shot.

Far below, appearing no larger than ants, members of the clan poured out of the cabins. Newt grinned again, but was careful to aim each shot carefully at his target on the cliff. He had started away from Meredith's homestead with forty-eight cartridges for the carbine. He had used fourteen of them to kill the eleven cow critters. He now fired about a dozen shots.

Every bullet fell short and kicked up dust in the open space between two cabins. A thirty-foot circle drawn on the ground would have enclosed the spots where the bullets struck. Having discovered the range, Newt was careful not to hurt anybody. He was deliberately stirring up a hornet's nest—and was enjoying the process.

Within a short time, five horsemen spurred simultaneously from beneath the roof of an open shed. They crossed a field at a wild gallop. One dismounted to open a gate; the others did not wait for him; they disappeared among the trees on the trail down to Mink Creek.

"Now, I wonder," Newt chuckled. "I wonder where they're going—and what they think they're gonna do when they git there?"

He turned his head for a look at the bench. One glance was enough. He leaped up and hastened to his horse.

Less than a mile away, a horseman had popped over the brow of a rolling hill and had disappeared again within a few seconds into one of the hollows between the hills. It was the sixth man of the clan, who had been homeward bound. Now he was hastening to investigate the cause of all the shooting he had faintly heard.

As Newt swung into the saddle he saw the approaching rider top another hill some two hundred yards closer. Newt's horse wanted to take its time in picking its way down the rocky, brushy slope to the open pasture, but Newt could not see it that way at all. It would not do to allow the other man to get close enough to get even a suspicion that it was not Meredith who was riding Meredith's horse.

Newt was still nearly half a mile in the lead when he reached the brush at the far end of the bench. He dismounted behind a thicket, tied the horse, then hastened back with the carbine and proceeded to carry out another scientific experiment; namely, to discover how many bullets kicking up the dust in front were necessary to turn back the pursuer. Newt was disappointed at the result, for the rider pulled up his horse at what Newt called hint No. 2.

As the discouraged horseman turned homeward, Newt used a jackknife to cut a queer design on the soft point of a bullet. Then he sent this bullet within a few feet of the horseman's ears. He grinned at the result, for the rider bent forward as he dug home with his spurs. The mutilation of the bullet had caused its flight to be a screaming, howling shriek. It had been a favorite trick of Newt's for purposes of intimidation in the old days.

"Gosh!" said Newt. "I hate to think of all the fun I've been missin' since I took to city life. By rights, I oughta change my name and try homesteadin' again. It'd help renew my youth."

He sighed as he thought of what he now regarded as his wasted years in the city. He felt sad as he mounted the horse and allowed the animal to proceed homeward at a walk.

HE WAS still sad as he deliberately tied the horse just outside the gate at the foot of the trail. He loosened the cinch, pulled the carbine from the boot and then started for the house, sadly shaking his head as he looked back over his shoulder.

"Gosh!" he muttered. "If any of the clan has any brains a-tall they'll sure smell a dead rat under the nice soft mattress I put out for 'em to lay on. I sure fixed things too danged easy for 'em to read. Reckon that I'll do a li'l readin', myself. A geography lesson or mebbe a li'l study of navigation will mebbe fix me up. You sure need something, Newt, when you start doubtin' your own handiwork."

His reading lesson, a minute later, consisted of studying the bottle of Green River. He was a conscientious student; he read the label, the contents and the Plimsoll mark after each bit of interior investigation.

"Two big ones and a runt makes three—or mebbe only two and a half. One and five makes six—" thinking of the clan.

As he had put it, he had made posses look natural by making monkeys out of them, had left them holding the bag or still making a cautious advance—while he was letting his horse pick its own pace in taking its rider toward another county or another State or Territory. Young Newt Lucas had been given credit for uncanny luck. He had never been honored by being found guilty of possessing brains, of having carefully chosen in advance his own site for a mock battle and having his line of retreat wide open behind him.

Newt was now no longer young, but he still possessed his youthful humorous gift.

"Two and a half against six," he soliloquized. "Them odds is ragged; I better make 'em even." He did so by taking a frugal drink. "Which makes it six of the clan against three drinks, plus me," he summed up to his own satisfaction. "Now, that clan is gonna stop and look at them dead cows, after they git over the ridge. And they'll be here in twenty minutes or half an hour, mebbe. Won't that be nice?"

He walked out through the kitchen door and looked at the horse tied a few yards uphill from the gate. He shook his head.

"Gosh, it sure will look fishy—to anybody with brains. But that hoss stays right there; I've jest gotta stick in this jackpot with the hand I dealt myself."

Some minutes later found Newt squatting in the brush at the lower edge of the clearing. He was keeping half an eye on the horse, visible across the open space, some seventy or eighty yards away. The carbine leaned against a tree. He reached for it, thumbed a cartridge into the magazine, then levered it into the breech. It was a cartridge with a mutilated bullet, Newt having just finished whittling a diagonal, curved notch on one side of its nose and digging a small quantity of lead from beneath the edge of the jacket. He prepared three more cartridges, varying the degree and design of mutilation on each bullet. It was a harmless pastime which suited his queer sense of humor.

He was shoving the fourth cartridge in through the loading gate when he saw the horse's ears prick up. Perhaps a full minute later he saw a furtive movement a few yards from the animal. Some one had slipped quickly and quietly across the trail and was now crouching behind a *toyon* bush. Newt could see the top of a hat. Then a man appeared in plain sight in the middle of the trail. He came slowly, warily, at a still-hunting pace, a rifle thrust forward, the butt half raised to his shoulder. He stopped; his head turned quickly as he looked for an enemy, or something, in or about the clearing. Another of the clan appeared, a youth in his 'teens, imitating every movement of the man ahead of him. He stopped about two feet behind the wary one. A fourth man appeared. He was bearded to the eyes. Newt made a guess to the effect that this was the elder Moffitt. Behind him came two more of the clan.

They had appeared so silently that if Newt Lucas had been depending on his ears he would have had no warning at all. The bearded man whispered cautiously, and the four members of the clan who were in plain sight with him disappeared like four rabbits into the brush. But Newt did not overlook a movement. His eyesight was exceptionally good; he spotted a hat here, a face there, and gun muzzles that were poked through or over the brush to command the house and clearing. The elder Moffitt, who had remained in sight, now stepped cautiously down to where the horse was tied.

NEWT grinned as he saw Moffitt pat the horse on the fore shoulder and then slide one hand down to pick up a hoof. He watched Moffitt examine three hoofs. Then, as Moffitt raised the fourth hoof, Newt cut loose and sent a screaming, howling, mutilated bullet within a few inches of the horse's ears. The animal reared, ears straight up, eyes rolling in alarm, as it jerked back on the stout halter rope. Moffitt went rolling into the wire fence.

Newt, having fired the shot, immediately started crawling to his left, toward the gate which opened on the head of the trail down to the creek. He had not moved more than six or seven feet before two bullets went rattling through the brush where he had been a scant moment before. Two of the clan had spotted the quick flash in the brush from the carbine's muzzle.

Newt appreciated the quickness with which his humorously intended bullet had been returned. There came a few more shots, fired at random. Newt regarded these as being more dangerous than deliberately aimed bullets. The elder Moffitt had now disengaged himself from the fence.

"Quit that shootin'!" he bellowed.

A few feet to Newt's left lay an oak log about fifteen inches in diameter. Newt took care to shoot generously high as he fired a bullet blindly through his screen of brush, then scrambled hastily behind the log. Several bullets came searching for him.

"Quit that—you! Joe—and the rest of you—quit that shootin'!" Moffitt shouted.

"Tell that damn' idjit to quit, pa!" came the answer. "He shot first. We're only protectin' ourselves."

"Don't talk back to me thet way! Remember Heck told us that another killin' up here would look bad. We'll have this cow killer arrested lawful; that'll git us shet of him."

Moffitt had taken shelter behind some young *manzanitas* a few yards up the trail. But his hat still lay where he had lost it when he had tangled with the wire fence.

Newt Lucas, behind the log, had crawled nearer the creek trail. The brush between the log and the lower fence around the clearing grew thinner as he approached the trail. A small aperture in the leaves and twigs finally gave him a limited view across the clearing. But he could see no higher than part of the hog wire at the bottom of the far fence. He lowered his head, but the top of the oak log right in front of him then cut off his view. About all he could see was a hat, a pearl gray, flat brimmed Stetson, with four dimples in the crown.

"I better go over to Heck right now and git us a warrant," said Moffitt. "I can git depitized to serve it, I reckon. Then I can depitize you boys, which will make it look fine and legal in case we hafta shoot this Meredith for resistin' arrest."

"Aw, that won't look good, either," a harsh, throaty voice cut in. "We better get officers from the Valley to come in and do it. That'll leave us clear and stop a lot of nasty suspicion and talk."

"Yeh, and he might sneak up tonight and kill another bunch of cows," a youthful voice piped up. "Shucks, pa, le's git him now and take him in with us. Heck will fix it up legal-like in some way for us—after we bring him in. We better play safe; nobody'll know the difference—after Heck fixes it up slick for us."

"We-ell, I dunno, boys," said Moffitt slowly. "I gotta think this over a mite. Jest hold your hosses for a minute."

None of this argument had been voiced very loudly, but Newt Lucas had good ears. Every word had carried distinctly across the clearing in the thin mountain air. Newt was rather amused.

"Moffitt's gittin' old and conservative," he murmured with a grin. "It's sure a sign of old age creepin' up when you begin to hesitate— Hell, I been hesitatin', myself. That won't do, a-tall. I gotta stir 'em up all over again and git some action outa this—jest to prove that I'm not so old, at that, myself."

Meanwhile, he had been studying that hat. It looked like a nice, new, expensive hat. It was a tempting target. Besides, it was the only thing belonging to the clan that he could see without exposing himself. The temptation was irresistible. He pushed the carbine barrel over the top of the log and aimed carefully at the hat.

"Dang these cheap, coarse, factory sights!" he muttered. "There oughta be a law agin 'em!"

He drew down fine and squeezed the trigger. The hat flipped uphill an inch or so.

Newt ducked back behind the log. Several bullets whizzed and rattled through the surrounding brush. One smashed through the top of the semi-rotten log within a foot of Newt's head. But the impetuous members of the clan had been shooting at a noise, not at a definite target. They had been unable to see the flash from the carbine muzzle. And Newt's bullet had gone cleanly through the aperture in the brush; there were no cut twigs dropping down to give away the exact point from which he had fired.

"Hey, pa! He shot your fancy hat!" the youthful voice announced.

MR. MOFFITT did not receive this news cheerfully. To put it mildly, he cast numerous and profane aspersions upon the ancestry of the man who would shoot up a prize hat. The next moment he came wriggling down through the brush into plain sight of Newt and stretched out one hand to recover the hat. Newt, grinning, had drawn another bead on the Stetson. Now he sent another of his pet bullets screeching across the open space. The hat abruptly jerked away from Moffitt's reaching fingers.

The outraged Mr. Moffitt recklessly sprang to his feet, seized the hat and then dived into the brush on the other side of the trail. A wail arose, combined with mixed anguish and anger.

"It's plumb spoiled! Part of the brim is shot off! Dag nab him, anyway, the dirty skunk! Go git him, boys! Go show him he can't git funny with us!"

"How about swearing out the warrant for him, pa?"

"The hell with that! We'll git it afterwards. It's up to us right now to stop all this crime and malicious mischief in these parts!"

"He's sure turned virtuous all of a sudden," Newt murmured to himself as he listened.

The odds against Newt were six to one. Moffitt's plan for rounding up the man on the other side of the clearing was excellent. The only flaw was that his voice carried distinctly across the open space. Newt heard every word.

Two of the clan were to go around the long way of the clearing. Three were to go the short way. Moffitt, armed with a Colt, was to remain by the upper gate until a whistle informed him that Meredith's trail had been picked up. None of the clan believed for a moment that the man in ambush across the clearing was any one but Meredith.

Moffitt had no doubt at all but that Meredith would retreat and take to the creek bed. The far side of the creek for a mile was sheer, perpendicular cliff that could not be climbed. Once it had been established that Meredith was taking the trail down to the creek, the rest would be easy. The two boys who were to circle the long way of the clearing would be informed by a whistle signal as to what was what. They would then hasten obliquely down the hill and reach the creek at a point about half a mile above where Meredith's trail reached the stream. Meredith had slashed out a saddle trail down through the scattered brush to facilitate his getting a mess of trout whenever he wanted them. He had been in the habit of riding down to the creek, tying his horse, fishing for awhile and then riding back up the hill on the horse.

The other half of Moffitt's plan was for three of the clan to hurry around the short end of the clearing until they struck the creek trail. If they were sure that Meredith had headed down for the creek, they were to give the signal. Two of them would then strike off through the brush at a tangent to reach the semicircle of the creek bed at a point about half a mile below Meredith's trail. One of them would follow directly down the trail and would be overtaken by the elder Moffitt.

It was a neat scheme, for, if Meredith had been trying to retreat and take the easiest path out of the country, he would inevitably encounter one of the three pairs that the clan members had split into. It is highly probable, however, that even if old Newt Lucas had not overheard the plan he would have been able to squeeze out from under. Practise makes perfect and, some decades before, young Newt Lucas had obtained much practise at slipping away from posses and vigilante committees. He had maintained a theory to the effect that in wild country the advantage is always with the hunted man. There undoubtedly are many who will arise to dispute this theory; but it is safe to state that none of these doubters has ever been on a posse trying to bump off, pin down or capture the elusive quantity that had been represented by Newt Lucas in his youth and prime. The clan might have succeeded in shooting or catching Meredith—but wily old Newt Lucas was something else again.

Newt did not get alarmed in the slightest. On the contrary, he was more than a bit amused. He regarded the man hunting members of the clan as rank amateurs. His good sportsmanship told him that amateurs ought to be encouraged. There intruded, however, the thought of his only living relative, Mrs. Meredith, recovering from typhoid.

"That clan is sure composed of damned snakes," Newt cogitated. "And they're trying to corner me! Me!" he repeated angrily. "Why, I could 'a' put a lead token into every danged one of 'em. I'm plumb merciful, I am! That's m' failing; it allus was m' failing. I sort of gag at murders—and the Lord knows I've had enough excuses and enough chances."

So Newt retreated down the trail for perhaps forty yards. From this point, just to encourage the amateurs, he sent a bullet zipping through the brush and leaves toward the general vicinity of the upper gate. He was careful, however, to aim high. That done, he continued downhill for fifty or sixty yards, and was working overtime to leave a plain trail of bootheels behind. Newt regarded this as being exceedingly raw work.

The rest of it was neat work. He stopped on a rock, pulled off his boots and then started in his stocking feet uphill through the thin brush toward the long end of the clearing. He took his time, progressing leisurely and silently, stopping now and then to listen and mark the approximate position of the pair who were working their way around to meet him. They tried to be stealthy, but to Newt their progress was as silent as that of a circus calliope in a street parade.

HE FINALLY crawled into a thicket and pulled on his boots. It was his intention to remain concealed until the two approaching members of the clan had passed by. But a shrill whistle sounded from a point perhaps one hundred and fifty yards away. Then two piercing notes—prearranged signals. The two clan members nearest Newt immediately started hotfooting obliquely down the hill toward the creek. Newt heard them crash through some thin brush instead of going around it.

After waiting a moment or two, Newt softly stole out of his concealment and started toward the long end of the clearing. He went slowly, being careful of every step, least he break a dry twig or stumble and arouse suspicion. He peered through the brush near the fence just in time to see the elder Moffitt open the rear gate and start down the creek trail. Newt waited for a few seconds, then crawled through the barbed wire and took the shortest route for the upper gate, directly across the green patch of alfalfa.

He reached the horse, shoved the carbine into the boot, tightened the cinch and climbed into the saddle. A few steps, and he and the horse were out of sight of the clearing, around a turn of the trail among the brush and trees. He pulled in the horse, leisurely bit the end from a cigar and finally struck a match.

"I'll betcha that old Moffitt and his pet boy tracker are scratchin' their haids right now at the end of the nice bootheel trail. Them amateurs is so easy that there ain't no fun a-tall in foolin' 'em."

Newt's tone indicated that he was slightly disgusted instead of being amused. But the cigar was held upward at a cocky angle between his lips when he rode on.

Near the ridge trail he found, as he had expected to, six horses. He dismounted, turned them loose one by one and sent each hurrying homeward by a resounding slap.

"Awful childish trick," mourned Newt, "but I jest had to do it to give the clan a hint that I ain't no amateur!"

He seemed to feel real sorry for himself as he rode toward Lanesburg. He had had an unusual opportunity "to git playful with the clan"—as he put it—but felt that somehow or other he had cheated himself by not squeezing all the juice out of the opportunity he had held in his grasp. He could not put a finger on where he had missed out, which saddened him all the more.

It was dark when he arrived in Lanesburg and located the livery stable.

"Meredith lent me his horse and told me to leave it here till he called for it," he explained.

Then, after spending a satisfactory half hour in the restaurant, he hired the garage owner to drive him to Valley City. He found Meredith at a hotel and had him summon the young attorney. In the conference Newt assumed a meek, innocent, virtuous air and casually narrated, from the viewpoint of a scandalized eye witness, the events that had taken place in the hills a few hours before. The attorney looked shocked.

"Yep," Newt wound up, "it looks to me like there's a dangerous character loose up in them parts. You come in on this, son, because there'll be a warrant out by tomorrow, sure, for your client. Can you git any alibis for him?"

"Well, rather." The youngster grinned. "If this clan names the hour correctly or even if they take in most of the afternoon, I can produce witnesses galore, up to and including the sheriff and the district attorney. The D. A. is my uncle."

"Well, the approximate hour and the number of cows will probably be the only true facts that the clan will give."

"I hope that I won't have to find alibis for you."

"You won't. I bet you can't even prove that I was up in them hills. You've only got my word for it—and I'm an awful liar when I have to be."

"Did you say you had been there? I didn't hear you. In fact I'll know nothing until I receive a telephone call from Lanesburg saying that my client has been arrested. Mr. Meredith is not aware as yet, officially, that he is likely to be arrested."

"Fine and dandy!" Newt grinned. "And while you're in that state of mind, just remember that you've never seen me. I'm real pleased to have met a young feller who's got plenty of savvy like you got. I'll foot the expense if you'll hire one of them fellers who can write down every word that's said in this preliminary trial what'll take place in Lanesburg before this Judge Heckangone—or whatever his name is."

"I can—but it will be unusual for preliminary hearings in this county."

"Well, she'll be an unusual hearing," Newt promised. "She'll be worth hearing. She'll be a three-ring circus—and you'll have the chance of a lifetime to be the ringmaster. Shucks! If you handle it right it'll be the making of you as a lawyer. Now, listen—"

Newt lighted a cigar, then started talking. He talked until he finally discarded the short butt of the perfecto. His final words were:

"So you see I'm shoving out a stack of blues that the clan ain't honest. If I'm right, my conscience won't trouble me none a-tall. If I'm wrong, I'll pungle up a good price for them dead cows. I'll leave it to you to see that the clan gits the cash without me gittin' incriminated none. But there ain't a chance of my bein' forced to pungle up. I know them kind of folks backwards; they won't stick to straight facts. If they do, well that'll be my loss and their gain. And, either way, young Meredith can't lose. He'll be in the clear, with the alibi you can furnish. You savvy now, complete, don't you? Well, good night, boys; I'm gonna stake me out a bed."

EARLY the next morning, Newt hired a car to take himself and Meredith north. The first destination was the foothill ranch where his horse had been left by Meredith. Newt got out here, to saddle the horse, while Meredith continued in the car to the livery stable to get his own horse. They met later on the trail leading into the Red Mountain country.

"We'll probably meet some of the clan," said Newt. "But don't let that worry you none. My vest and shirt are both unbuttoned. But the clan probably won't try to git rough—I never did have any luck."

"What's the joke about the shirt and vest? Are you carrying a gun?"

"Naw!" Newt snorted. "I'm carryin' a phonograft record—sort of a breastplate. I ain't let her play her tune for a long, long time; but she's all wound up to go if anybody starts her. And if we meet the clan, or some of it, son, I want you to be real sassy-like. Live up to the reputation I made for you yesterday. Ask Moffitt point blank if he's goin' in to swear out a warrant for you."

"I will, Uncle Newt—because you tell me to. But I can't see any sense in asking a question like that."

"There's a flock of sense. Yesterday I wasted the best chance I've had in years to git me a li'l action. I was dealin' the cards but when I picked up my hand I didn't like it. They wasn't exactly the cards I meant to deal. So now I sort of want to speed up the game till it gits around again to be my deal. Whether Moffitt admits he's gonna git a warrant for you or whether he won't admit nawthin'— Well, if we meet him a-tall we'll jest turn right around and ride back into Lanesburg with him. Your cue is to speak right up in meeting—real brash and sassy-like. I know what his cards are gonna be even before the deck gits shuffled. We're playin' with the joker wild, and I'm the joker. Heh-heh!"

"Well, Uncle Newt, I started out to play my cards just as you dealt them. And I'm not weakening. Your dealing off that handful of currency to me probably saved me from future years of cutting out paper dolls or making putty statues and then hitting them with my fist. No fooling, I was just about crazy with worry along about the time you blew in. I'll take your word for things now."

"Well, yank out that carbine and carry it across the saddle in front of you. It looks better that way. Jest let it lay there if we meet the clan. Don't raise it unless the clan goes for their guns."

Newt lighted a cigar, then urged his horse into the lead when they rode on.

Presently he removed the cigar from his mouth to flip off the first bit of ash. Abruptly he reined in his horse and signaled for Meredith to do likewise. In a moment a rider came around a bend in the trail. It was the elder Moffitt. Two of the clan were with him.

Newt stuck the cigar between his lips and waited.

"Git off the trail, you!" Moffitt ordered belligerently.

"Don't hafta," Newt returned easily. "It's my trail."

"It's your what?" Moffitt roared.

"I said trail."

"Why, you—"

"Take it easy, pardner," Newt cut in. "You better learn some of these here, now, vital statistics. This is the ridge trail."

"What the hell difference does that make? Of course it's the ridge trail."

"Well, I'm Mr. Ridge!" said Newt. "Think that over."

Newt's cigar tilted upward until the glowing tip endangered his right eyebrow. He kept a straight face by an effort.

The two other riders had crowded their horses forward.

"He's joshing you, pa," said one. "Don't let him do it."

"Who's joshing?" Newt demanded severely. "My name is Ridge—Clay Ridge. They call me Rocky for short. And as long as you behave yourselves you're plumb welcome to use my trail."

Newt urged his horse part way into the brush at one side. He turned his head long enough to throw a quick wink at Meredith, who now barred the trail.

"Are you going in to get a warrant for me?" Meredith inquired.

"What business is that of your'n?" Moffitt snarled.

"Seems to me that it's a lot of my business."

"Well, it ain't! Not yet! Git off the trail!"

"Did something happen to your hat, mister?" Newt inquired. "Or do you like your hats that way?" Newt eyed the perforated, torn headgear with what seemed to be child-like, innocent curiosity.

Moffitt glared, momentarily speechless with rage.

"That was just a friendly question," Newt continued. "You needn't look as though you'd like to spit in my eye. How'd I know you was touchy about your hat?"

"You're too danged fresh!" Moffitt

finally blurted out. "What the hell business have you got up here, anyway?"

"That, mister, if answered correctly by me will probably be an awful surprise to you. You're plumb liable to git shocked. Yep! Nawthin' less than shocked."

"Aw, swing on him, pa!" a younger Moffitt advised. "He's been joshin' you alla time. Don'tcha stand for it!"

"Shut up!" Moffitt bellowed at his offspring. "You, Joe! You slide back home and git the rest of the boys. You'll prob'ly find us in town."

Moffitt glared at Joe, who swung his horse around and departed. Moffitt transferred his glare to Newt, but after a few seconds discovered that Newt's innocent eyes held a gleam of amusement that was disconcerting.

Newt removed his cigar from his mouth with his left hand.

"Nice day, ain't it?" he observed politely. "Does it ever rain up here this time of year?"

"Arf!" Moffitt said throatily, trying to cover his vague feeling of discomfiture and inferiority by putting all the contempt he could muster into the one exclamation.

He spurred his horse forward past Newt and crashed it through the brush to get past Meredith. The other rider followed. Stiff backed, with never even a single glance over a shoulder, they rode out of sight.

Newt grinned, carefully inspected the ash on the end of his cigar, then spoke.

"Shucks, son, if that's the sacred bull or the bellwether of the clan, I think he's been plumb slandered. Why, most anybody could git along peaceable with him. I could—dead easy. Looks to me like you're too danged meek and lowly to git along with your neighbors. Well, le's mosey along back to town."

FIFTEEN minutes after his arrival in Lanesburg, a warrant was served on Meredith. The complaint detailed several felonies and misdemeanors. The preliminary hearing, before Judge Heckledorff in Lanesburg, was set for two o'clock that afternoon. With Meredith safely locked in the town calaboose, Newt first got the young attorney on the telephone to notify him of his client's arrest, then hired a car to get to the county seat in order to supervise, as it were, the young man's next moves.

Newt need not have worried in the slightest. The youthful lawyer had been nine jumps ahead of Newt, having thoughtfully in advance partly filled in the subpoenas for nine witnesses. After receiving Newt's telephoned information he had rushed these subpoenas through.

It was an off day in the county seat. Three deputy sheriffs, having nothing else to do, and having been requested to stay within reach, were on hand when the subpoenas were officially issued. Each deputy had been given three subpoenas—and all were served within a few minutes. The young attorney was in his home town, where he had many friends and no enemies.

It may not have been strictly legal to serve a subpoena on the district attorney to appear as a defense witness, but the reaction on the part of the prosecutor was favorable. The young attorney was his favorite nephew. And when one of his own deputies had served a subpoena on the sheriff, this officer had chuckled as he accepted service. Yes, indeed, the young attorney was in his home town.

Shortly before two o'clock that afternoon two large touring cars came roaring into Lanesburg. Twelve passengers stepped out of the cars and filed into Judge Heckledorff's small office. They included nine subpoenaed witnesses, the young attorney, Newt Lucas and a court reporter. Six members of the clan were on hand outside the office. So was most of Lanesburg's population.

Judge Heckledorff's office was small. It contained one table and five chairs. So, necessarily, the scene of the preliminary hearing was transferred to the roomy Odd Fellows' Hall, above the general merchandise store. And even at that, there was standing room only for most of the curious spectators.

It was the most important case that the young attorney had handled thus far in his budding career. He made the most of it, for it literally was a made-to-order case. To keep from laughing out loud he avoided the danger of meeting the gaze of Newt Lucas. He and Newt carried frozen faces which were so similar in expression that Newt afterward described the young attorney as looking as meek and innocent as a cat with goldfish feathers hanging on his chops. Newt looked the same. And both were figuratively licking their chops.

One after another, the six older male members of the clan were called to the witness stand. Their answers agreed very neatly. The sum of their testimony was to the effect that between four-thirty and five o'clock of the day before, the defendant — Meredith — had maliciously killed with a carbine eleven head of cattle. That he had been caught in the act; that they, the members of the clan, being law abiding citizens, had attempted to arrest Meredith and had been feloniously fired upon with intent to kill by the defendant.

"If the Court will permit," the budding attorney requested suavely, "I shall again place the prosecuting witnesses on the stand. I am not entirely satisfied with their testimony."

"Go ahead—if it'll do you any good," was Judge Heckledorff's reply. He cast an indulgent, smug glance toward the district attorney. "Truth is mighty and will prevail—and I'll give it every chance to prevail," he added fatuously and pompously, this remark being addressed more or less to the prosecuting officer of the county.

The young attorney thereupon recalled the elder Moffitt.

"What was the approximate hour at which or during which these cattle were killed?" he questioned.

"Between ha' pas' four and five."

"You saw the defendant shoot these cattle?"

"I sure did!"

"You recognized him positively?"

"I sure did, positively!"

"Between four-thirty and five o'clock?"

"Yeh; that's the correct time."

"How do you know that that was the correct time?"

"By this watch here," said Moffitt, pulling out the timepiece. "This old key winder don't lose a minute in a month."

"You are sure that you looked at the watch?"

"I sure did."

"And you are positive that you recognized Mr. Meredith as the man who killed the cattle at that hour?"

"I sure am!"

"You were close enough to recognize him?"

"I sure was!"

"How close were you?"

"Jest a few yards away."

"Oh, you were *that* close? That's why you are positive of your identification?"

"Hell, yes!"

"Why didn't you catch Mr. Meredith—if you were that close to him when he shot your cattle at that hour?"

"He shot at us. He tried to kill us."

"That's interesting. Why didn't you shoot back—in self-defense?"

"Mister, we ain't shootin' nobody, nohow. We're plumb peaceable. We leave it to the law to take care of the men who try to kill us."

"Eleven head of cattle were killed, you say?"

"That's correct."

"And you were within a few yards, you say, of the man who shot the cattle?"

"Yeh; we sure were."

"How did you happen to be there?"

"Because we're afeared!" said Moffitt. "These lawless homesteaders are plumb li'ble to do anything. We've gotta watch all our stock so's they won't be shot."

"Oh, the homesteaders are dangerous?"

"They sure are."

"I see. And you've fixed the hour so positively. Just how did you come to fix the hour?"

"Why, right after I'd been shot at, I got off my hoss and lay down behind a rock. I didn't want to be killed. I pulled out my watch then and looked at it. She was jest exactly a quarter of five at that minute."

"I see. And just after you looked at your watch, how far was Meredith from you?"

"He was heading across the bench. He was headin' for the bresh up by the ridge trail."

"What did you do then—or after that?"

"We trailed him. It was dead easy. His hoss had three shoes pulled; only one shoe left on him."

"What happened after you trailed him, as you say?"

"He tried to kill us. He tried plenty, but we was too slick for him."

"At what time was this?"

"Oh, around five o'clock."

"You are positive of the time and of the identity of the man who you allege tried to kill you?"

"I sure am."

"That'll be all."

And the next witness who belonged to the clan took his cue from the elder Moffitt and substantiated every statement. So did the others.

"Your Honor," the young attorney said at last, addressing Judge Heckledorff, "I shall now attempt to show the Court that all of the prosecuting witnesses have baldly committed perjury."

"Them's harsh words, young feller," the justice warned him. "But go ahead and try. I reckon that's your privilege."

THE YOUNG feller went ahead and tried. It can truthfully be set down that he did worse than that. He figuratively tossed a lighted match into a large bin filled with pinwheels, skyrockets and devil fire. A first class asbestos curtain, if dropped between the clan and the witness stand, would have been hard put to live up to its guarantee.

One high light, picked from many, was when the sheriff unpinned his badge and dropped it together with his Colt in the district attorney's lap.

"I've resigned!" he shouted, as he stalked toward the elder Moffitt.

"Get out of that chair," he snapped.

Moffitt arose. In height, weight, age and temperament they were well matched.

"What did you call me?" the ex-sheriff demanded.

"I called you a liar!" Moffitt yelped.

The next instant found Mr. Moffitt again sitting in his chair busily counting stars, or something, having discovered very easily that the temporary ex-sheriff not only objected to being called a liar but could uncork a fast left hook to prove that he objected. Mr. Moffitt's right eye was ready to go into mourning and Mr. Moffitt himself was momentarily dazed. But only momentarily. He belligerently sprang up from the chair. The rest of the clan leaped to their feet.

"Order in the court! Order in the court!" Judge Heckledorff barked out, hammering on the table in front of him with both fists.

Two of the witnesses from Valley City stepped quickly in between Moffitt and the sheriff. The local deputy and the constable confronted the five younger members of the clan and made them resume their seats. A touch on the shoulder and a warning word caused Moffitt to sit down again. The sheriff blew his breath on his knuckles as he walked away.

"I demand satisfaction," Moffitt wailed, gingerly fingering one eye.

He looked toward Judge Heckledorff, but it happened that Newt Lucas, who had gently edged forward, was standing directly in front of the judge. Newt took the appealing glance and the demand as being directed at him.

"You're sure a glutton," Newt drawled. "It looked to me as though you'd got satisfaction enough—if that was what you was cravin'. Another dose of satisfaction like that would likely plumb ruin you!"

Newt was a stranger; therefore he was a mystery, more or less. At any rate, it happened that everybody listened to Newt's humorously drawled reply. Newt had personality and the faculty of making people listen to him. Order in the court having technically been restored, only a few restrained snickers were heard. None of these came from the clan. A brief silence followed, broken finally by Judge Heckledorff, who jerked a thumb toward Newt and appealed to the district attorney—

"Ain't he guilty of contempt of court?"

"Not in the slightest, in my opinion. His quiet way of answering a question which seemed to have been put to him while court was temporarily not in session is entirely commendable."

"I never ast no question!" Moffitt loudly denied. "I demanded satisfaction!"

"Well?" The district attorney kept a straight face.

"Ain't he guilty of contempt of court?" The judge jerked his facile thumb toward the sheriff.

"Kindly remember, your Honor," said the district attorney, "that I am not here officially. Also that I am not supposed to interpret questions of this sort. A judiciary officer is supposedly able to make his own interpretations."

"Dag nab it!" Heckledorff exploded. "I'm stuck! Can't you help me out a little? I don't know what authority I've got over the sheriff. Didn't he disturb the peace or commit an assault—or contempt the court?"

"I didn't notice. I only heard. I heard him called a liar. What would be your ruling on that?"

"I don't know. All I know is that this session ain't been peaceful and legal, as called for in the statutes. I'm asking your assistance to interpret the unusual happenings."

"Yes, I'll admit that they were slightly unusual," said the district attorney in a dry tone. "It is not usual to call a witness a liar in a courtroom. If our worthy sheriff's actions were not strictly decorous, and if my unofficial interpretation is requested, I would advise you to call it a standoff. I would also advise you to dismiss the case against the defendant, Meredith. Perjury in a justice's court usually is not taken very seriously, but today I have witnessed and heard the most flagrant instance of perjury in the history of this county. In fact, I am adding unofficially that the statements made under oath by the plaintiff and his witnesses have been disproven so thoroughly that an official investigation and some indictments from my office will be entirely in order. I suggest that you order court again to be in session, in case any more testimony is to be taken."

Judge Heckledorff looked inquiringly at Moffitt, who refused to respond at all. Moffitt knew that the testimony of himself, his sons and his sons-in-law had been set down by the court reporter. The reporter's presence in Judge Heckledorff's court was more than an unusual circumstance; in fact it was extremely suspicious. Moffitt very well realized that in some manner things had gone entirely against him. And all he had done was to take the facts as he had seen them and present them in court.

He was fully convinced that he had done no wrong in swearing to his positive identification of Meredith. Well, maybe he had not *seen* Meredith—not exactly—but he had just as good as seen him. He vaguely reasoned that there was something fishy somewhere. He glared around at the witnesses from Valley City. Dully, he heard Judge Heckledorff dismiss the case against Meredith.

"And it is only fitting that the costs be paid by the plaintiff," the young attorney declared. Judge Heckledorff was forced to concur with this.

A short time later, Moffitt and the five other members of the clan rode sullenly out of Lanesburg. They were boiling mad. The court costs had been plenty, due to the subpoenas for defense witnesses. As they rode they talked or shouted. The sum of their argument was that they certainly had been given a raw deal when they had tried to be law abiding citizens. The nearer they got to home the more they were convinced that they were the possessors of a large flock of outraged virtue, and that they would be fully justified in going in for a campaign of bigger and better atrocities against the homesteaders in the Red Mountain country.

IT WAS about ten o'clock the next morning when Newt Lucas blithely rode into the clan village. A freshly lighted cigar was held upward at a cocky angle between his lips. His Colt was now in his favorite holster, in plain sight, strapped low on his thigh. The contraband United States marshal's badge was in the right hand outer pocket of his coat where he could reach it easily. And in the coat's inside pocket were a few stock certificates of The Flying Eagle Oil Company of California. These were beautiful works of engraving. They had cost Newt one thousand dollars some years before. The alleged company had quietly folded its tents and disappeared into thin air. Upon coming to California, Newt had made some inquiries about this alleged oil company and had discovered that the only oil resources it had ever owned had been the oil on the glib tongues of its salesmen.

Moffitt met Newt. He wore a Colt on his left hip, the way of the school of cross-draw gunmen. Newt removed the cigar from his lips and delicately knocked off the ash. Meanwhile he studied, purely from a scientific viewpoint, Moffitt's manner of wearing a gun. Newt's opinion of it was not high. The last gun-fight he had witnessed had been between a cross-draw artist and the wearer of a "halfbreed holster". The result had been just too bad for the cross-draw man.

"What do you want?" Moffitt almost snarled the words.

"Well, for one thing—" Newt replaced the cigar in his mouth—"I want a little civility."

"Yeh? Who the hell are you?"

"You'd be plumb surprised," said Newt mildly.

He reached for the small gold badge and handed it to Moffitt, who took it and studied it carefully.

"U. S. marshal, hey?" said Moffitt, finally, returning the badge. "I'm still asking what you want."

"Your tone of voice is a li'l better," Newt answered. "But there's room for improvement. Right now, screw the idea into your head that I'm with you and for you! I'm your friend, savvy? I think you got some kind of a raw deal yesterday. The sheriff of this county doesn't seem to like you; he'll take a hell of a lot of pleasure out of holding a sheriff's sale on your lands up here."

"What do you mean—sheriff's sale?"

"My gosh!" Newt exclaimed. "Don't you know anything about law? You're hooked higher than seven kites in a high wind on Thursday on the suit for false arrest that this Meredith is bringing against you."

At this news Moffitt wilted, but recovered quickly.

"Them witnesses lied!" he snapped out.

"They did? Well, you'll have a hell of a time proving it. When you've got the district attorney and sheriff as witnesses against you, where the hell do you think you'll git off? You won't have a chance! Meredith's suit is for ten thousand dollars—an' the chances are that he'll git judgment for the whole amount."

"I'll do some shootin' first!" Moffitt spluttered.

"That's the trouble," said Newt. "You've already done too much shooting!"

"Wadda you mean?"

Newt managed to keep a straight face as he pulled out the packet of stock certificates.

"Uncle Sam may move awful slow, but he's got a long arm. You may think you're safe—and then old Uncle Sam comes down on you like six thousand bricks. Now here—" Newt peeled one stock certificate. Moffitt was allowed to have a good look at the flying eagle and the gold seal. "This," Newt continued, "is an indictment under the United States Criminal Code—Chapter 4, Section 57—for wilfully destroying and removing certain section corners, certain quarter section corners and some certain meander posts of Government surveys. Also for cutting down certain witness trees and certain trees blazed to mark the line of Government surveys."

"Why, I never did anything of the

kind!" Moffitt yelped. "They can't prove it!"

"Well," Newt drawled, "remember that I'm right friendly and I've got a lot of discretion in serving these warrants. Now, on this particular one there ain't no statute of limitations. And there's two witnesses still alive who lay in the brush and saw you commit some of these violations of the U. S. statutes. If this one gits pressed, I'll see that you git off easy. It won't cost you more than two hundred and fifty dollars and not more than six months in jail."

"They can't prove it!" said Moffitt feebly.

"You just think it can't be proven!"

Newt tucked this particular stock certificate back into his inside coat pocket.

"Now, over the hill, on that mesa," he continued, "one of your boys homesteaded one hundred and sixty acres. He proved up on it—by fraud. You may think that there's no come-back after a man gits his Government deed. Well, you've got another think coming. With due regard to all liberal interpretations, there wasn't even a habitable house erected on that one hundred and sixty acres. Now, I've got a court notice here direct from Washington, all signed and sealed, about the li'l matter of homestead fraud."

"Lemme see it," Moffitt demanded.

"Nope! If I let you see it I'll hafta serve it."

Newt tucked another stock certificate out of sight. He knew that this last bluff was more than a bit raw, but on that account enjoyed all the more his attempt to put this particular whizzer over on Moffitt. He was playing poker without cards in an attempt to "make a Christian" out of the tough old hillman.

SO FAR as Newt knew, the Government, once having granted final proof on a homestead, never took the trouble to make the title void, even though fraud could be proven. As Newt put it to himself—

"Sometimes Uncle Sam oughta, but somehow jest don't!"

And now, knowing that he was skating on thin ice, Newt could not help cutting figure eights around the dangerous spot.

"Yeh, it'd jest about ruin your best pasture if that one hundred and sixty up there got thrown open to entry again," Newt continued. "Some salty homesteader would fence off all that water—and where would you be then?"

"I wouldn't stand for it!" Moffitt burst out.

"You jest think you wouldn't," Newt drawled. "Times have changed. It took Uncle Sam a long time to git his spyglass leveled on to what's been goin' on up here. Two Department men have been sifting around in this county for months. They've sure had their ears to the ground."

"They ain't been up here," Moffitt declared confidently.

"Which statement shows how slick our operators are. They've sure been here. You've got no idea of how much they could see from up on the mountain behind you there. They've got spyglasses that would let 'em count the flies on your smokehouse wall. They could read the earmarks on a pig. And them's the kind of spyglasses that work almost as good at night as they do in the daytime."

Newt paused, to let this sink in.

"But," he continued, "it was them homesteaders gittin' killed and burned or jest disappearin' mysterious-like from circulation, so to speak, that first made Uncle Sam screw his attention on these parts. He's been a long time gittin' around to it, but he's hell on wheels when he starts. Now, there never was any real evidence agin you havin' a hand in them homicides and disappearances. Nothing but gossip. We don't pay any attention to gossip. What we want is facts that we kin prove!" Then, with elaborate casualness, "Take that case of Mrs. Meredith being took with typhoid, for instance."

"Is she sick?" Moffitt inquired hastily. Too hastily.

"Naw!" said Newt, concealing outward expression of his feelings by throwing up a screen of sarcasm. "I reckon she jest thinks she's sick. Some women is that way. Now, as I was gonna say, Uncle Sam's boys is lucky. They tell me that they almost got proof. That they kin jest about lay a finger on a young feller in these parts who has been throwing poisoned pieces of meat over the fence into homesteaders' yards to kill dogs. They suspect this young feller."

"How come that you say they're lucky?"

"That's easy. They got secret instructions to settle these cases out of court if they kin. Settle 'em peaceably is what Uncle Sam means, but them instructions sometimes gits misunderstood. You know how it is with young fellers—they gits too enthusiastic. I got called clear over here from settling a case in Utah. I got there jest two days too late!" A pregnant, dramatic pause.

Moffitt took the cue.

"Too late?" he echoed.

"Yeh," said Newt sadly. "There was a young depity on the job, and he'd made the mistake of depitizin' a flock of homesteaders. He couldn't keep 'em in hand. When he tried to, they tied him up and laid him under a bush while they went out and finished the job he had started. They made a mistake."

"Sounds like they did," said Moffitt virtuously. "They shouldn't 'a' done that to a Government man."

"That's right, too. But that wasn't the big mistake they made."

"What was the big mistake?"

"They hung the wrong men!"

Newt screwed up his face sorrowfully.

"Three of them," he added. "All three of them on one limb. They were still swingin' there in the wind when I arrived. That's why Uncle Sam sent me out here in a hurry—jest to keep the peace and prevent them enthusiastic young depities from makin' similar mistakes in depitizin' homesteaders. I'm a full grown marshal—not a depity—and I've got a flock of jurisdiction and authority."

Newt suddenly was seized by an attack of coughing. It was a fake attack, but he had to do it to cover his emotions. Newt always had enjoyed the reputation of being a fairly good offhand liar, but this was the opportunity of a lifetime and he was making the most of it. As he put it afterward, in relating the lovely details to a crony in Omaha—

"I was so danged convincing that I got to believing my own lies."

He looked toward the group of buildings, where some women and children of assorted ages stood staring curiously.

"Where's the five men who were with you in court?" he inquired.

"They ain't here today," Moffitt replied.

"Well, I hope they ain't out trying to take the law into their own hands," said Newt. "It wouldn't look right—not when they're in wrong right now with the sheriff and the district attorney. Being in wrong with the county authorities is carrying an awful load without adding to it."

"They ain't doing nothing wrong," Moffitt snorted indignantly.

"Tha's fine. They can't afford to."

"They're up guardin' our cows," Moffitt continued. "They're waitin' for them danged homesteaders to try to shoot some more. Honestly, Mr. Marshal, eleven of our cows got shot. That's a heavy loss. And when we go to court we get treated like criminals—when we are the injured ones."

"Eleven cows, hey?" said Newt. "That's an interesting figure. Eleven, hey?"

"That's right! Eleven!"

"The other side of the story is that eleven boars were shot. Think that over. Them pair of elevens is so pat that it looks kinda funny to me."

"We don't know anything about that," Moffitt denied hastily. "Whose boars were they?"

"The homesteaders'," said Newt calmly, as he gazed up toward the opposite mountain. He did not dare meet Moffitt's gaze at that moment. "I kin see that you're innocent, Mr. Moffitt, but it looks bad."

"What does?"

"First eleven boars—then eleven cows. I hear that you have a lot of fine boars that you're keeping under fence."

"We have to keep them at home. We can't afford to feed them here, but we can't risk their being shot if we turn 'em loose on the acorns."

"Yeh? I thought you didn't know anything about the boar shootin' epidemic."

"Uh! Well, of course we kinda heard about it. We can't take chances."

"I don't blame you," said Newt. "But you don't want to ruin yourselves feedin' them boars at home. I think you'll save a lot of money and trouble if you'll jest take a chance and turn 'em loose. I'm up here to settle this thing out of court. And I'm plumb friendly to you, savvy?"

"But them eleven cows—"

"First, the eleven boars," Newt interrupted.

"But we don't know anything about them."

"Yeh? Well, I'll tell you what I think. I know you don't know anything about the eleven boars being shot. Maybe the eleven cows got shot by the same man who shot the eleven boars."

Newt grinned widely, knowingly, at Moffitt.

"Uh!"

MOFFITT almost choked. But Newt's queer grin was too much for the clan leader. Words began to curdle in Moffitt's system, strong words that he choked back because almost any of the words he wanted to say would be more or less incriminating.

"Uh!" he grunted again, struggling hard to answer grin with grin.

"Yeh," Newt continued. "I know you're plumb innocent. But you kin sure prove it by turning them boars loose—now. And never pen 'em up again," he added. "Remember that I'm plumb friendly. I'm tryin' to help you keep things out of courts. If you'd had to pay an attorney's bill on top of them costs you'd 'a' been stuck worse than you were." Newt paused.

"And speakin' of cows being shot," he went on, "and being plumb friendly to you, I'm advising you that if any homesteaders' cows ever stray on to the bench up there they'd better not git shot. I know you'd never shoot a homesteader's cow, Mr. Moffitt—but the trouble is that you'd git the blame, anyway. Now, about that one hundred and sixty acres being thrown open again to homesteading—"

"But they can't take that land away from us!" Moffitt protested desperately.

"Can't, hey? Why, it's as good as took right now—if I turn in the wrong report on it. I showed you the document, didn't I? Well, to show you that I'm plumb friendly I'm promising you that the document is going back to the land office with my recommendation that the present title be allowed to stand up as being valid—providing that no more protests or complaints are filed against it. The protests should have been made before final proof was allowed, not afterwards. Besides—" confidentially—"it ain't by rights part of my job to do field work for the land office. They knew I was coming up here, so they ast me as a favor to turn in a report on this matter. The trouble is that they allus hang extra jobs on to me because I'm good natured. And they know I'm reliable. Why—" Newt fished up the gold badge and displayed it—"why, I've been carryin' this for more than thirty years."

Newt grinned at his last statement. He could not help grinning. It was one of the few truths he had uttered to Moffitt.

"Yeh, I kin see, Mr. Moffitt, that you're plumb willing to do right by a homesteader. So, before going back to turn in my report, I'm gonna put a few fleas in the homesteaders' ears. I'll tell 'em they'd better drop their protests about that one hundred and sixty. I'll also tell 'em that you're guardin' that bench so's no more cows will git shot up there. Yep, I'll tell 'em that if their cows stray up there they will be plumb safe because you're protectin' 'em. I kin see that you've got a kindly, fatherly interest in homesteaders. I'll sure read the riot act to 'em about boars being shot. You jest go ahead and turn them boars loose, Mr. Moffitt. I'll see that none of 'em git shot."

Moffitt gulped several times, scratched his head and stared suspiciously at Newt. He was sadly puzzled. His guilty conscience told him that the perky, suave little man with the gold badge had the goods on him—plenty. What he could not understand at all was Newt's smooth casualness in referring to and then gliding over various misdemeanors and felonies which had been committed by the Moffitt clan.

Direct accusations or open threats would have been something that Moffitt could have met in kind. Newt's pose as a friend was extremely baffling. Newt had been enjoying himself thoroughly in artistically putting over the biggest bluff of his poker playing life; his one fear was that he had been too artistic, that Moffitt would fail to recognize the implied mailed fist beneath the velvet. He need not have worried. This outward friendliness was new stuff to Moffitt and therefore was all the more effective. The eleven dead cows against eleven boars was a large hint. Moffitt was intelligent enough to take up the rôle that Newt had wished upon him. He turned toward the group of buildings.

"Lulu!" he shouted. "You and Jimmy go turn them boars loose. Right now!" He turned back.

"Mr. Marshal, I'm sure glad to take up your guarantee that they won't get shot. We were gettin' ruined—feedin' 'em here at home."

"I could see that you were worried about 'em," said Newt. "They'll be safe. In fact, I don't think you kin afford to feed them boars at home. Jest let 'em run loose from now on."

"I sure will. Say, who's them witnesses who say they saw me and the boys cut down the witness trees and take away them corner stakes?"

"Hey!" Newt grinned. "I'm here to stop trouble—not to start some more. I didn't serve you with that warrant. I ain't likely to. It sticks out all over you that you're in trouble enough right now. Meredith has you on the hip for false arrest. I tried to talk him out of the idea, but he's going to sue you for ten thousand dollars. He's got a good chance to collect part of that amount, anyway. And if you fight the suit it'll cost you plenty. You'll be lucky if you don't hafta pungle up a thousand dollars jest for attorneys' fees and expenses. And you'll prob'ly lose —with all them witnesses from Valley City agin you. And the sheriff don't seem to like you, he'll take a lot of joy in holding a public sale of your lands to cover the amount of the judgment and costs. It won't do you any good to shoot the sheriff. They can make new sheriffs faster than you kin shoot 'em."

"I wasn't thinkin' of shootin' any sheriff," Moffitt faltered.

"Well, you looked like you was thinking it," said Newt. "And there's the district attorney. He's doing some thinking, too. If Meredith brings the suit for false arrest, the district attorney will jest naturally hafta indict all of you for perjury. I can't help doing some thinking, myself. I think you're gonna be plumb ruined."

"I ain't thinkin'," said Moffitt. "I jest can't realize that things are as bad as you put 'em."

"They're worse than that. Man, you've got only one chance."

"What's that?" Moffitt started eagerly.

"To fix things with Meredith—out of court."

"But I ain't got a chance. He won't listen to me. He shot eleven cows. He shot at me and the boys."

"Naw, he didn't!" said Newt. "He proved in court that he didn't. He had the best alibi that was ever proven in a court in this county."

"Well, he's mad. He's—"

"Do you blame him for bein' mad?" Newt interrupted. "A lot of dirt has been done to him since he started homesteadin' up here. And he's got a danged good idea of who's responsible for all of it."

"We never did it," Moffitt declared. His tone was not very convincing. "But we git blamed for everything."

"You sure do!" Newt agreed heartily. "The folks out in the Valley are digging up all the old rumors of what you're s'posed to have done. So help me, Moffitt, if it didn't look to me as though I'm the only man in these parts who's willing to believe that there's any good in you at all. And if you will help me I will kick those rumors back where they belong. I'll have a hard job doing it—and the hardest part will be to convince Meredith not to go through with that suit for ten thousand dollars. I've already tried to persuade him not to. He jest won't budge an inch. I've tried to tell him that it might cost him a lot of money to sue you—and that it might string through the courts for years, costin' him more and more money, and that you might beat the case in the end."

"Did you tell him that?" hopefully.

"Did I? Shucks! I told him all that in six different ways."

"That's fine. He ought to—"

"'Tain't fine! And he won't! That smart Aleck young lawyer he's got has guaranteed that it won't cost Meredith a dime. That young sprat knows that he's got you on the hip. He's out to make a reputation for himself—and money, too. It won't cost Meredith a dime to sue you, but the lawyer gits half of what he kin collect from you. Them lawyers is wolves, and money to them is jest like blood. And this wolf cub is ace high down in Valley City. He'll win, sure."

"'Tain't fair," Moffitt quavered.

"SURE, it ain't!" Newt agreed heartily. "But what kin you do about it? That lawyer has made Meredith so sure of gittin' money from you that Meredith has already planned to spend part of it in hiring men to clear that slope running down from his house to the creek and to build him a new big barn and to fence in the land that he's gonna git cleared."

"By Godfrey, we'll fight!" Moffitt roared with a flash of his usual arrogance. "We can't do nothin' else."

"You'll lose—no matter how you fight," Newt prophesied sadly.

"But what else kin I do? They'll shove my back to the wall."

"Better men than you have surrendered," Newt pointed out. "General Lee did it—because he was wise enough to know there was nawthin' else to do."

"How kin I? They won't let me. And I don't like the idea, anyhow."

"Neither did Lee. It's lucky for you that I'm here—and that I'm plumb friendly. I'll try to fix it for you to surrender—and make them gossipers look foolish. It's easy for me to see that you've been misjudged plenty. And I've got to have a plenty big talking point to make Meredith change his ideas. The keynote of pulling you outa trouble is to git Meredith to call off that wolf of a lawyer. And that's gonna be danged hard to do. The only way I see that you'll have a chance at all is for me to go to Meredith and tell him that you're now of a mind that maybe you and your boys made a li'l mistake. And that you're plumb anxious to make things right."

"We sure are!" said Moffitt. "But how kin we do it?"

"Easy. You're lucky that I'm plumb friendly. The way to take Meredith down offa his high horse is to steal his own ideas—that's the way I figger. Now, suppose I go to Meredith and tell him that you're sorry that he's had a lot of bad luck? And tell him that you're big hearted and neighborly, that you've got six able bodied men to swing axes and saws and that you'd like to prove that you're big hearted and neighborly by clearing all the slope for him between his house and the creek? And that when you come to a good fir shake tree, you'll knock it into shakes and that you'll use the shakes and good fir poles to throw him up a whopping fine barn?

"And that it will be no work at all—jest nawthin' but pleasure—for you and the boys to make a few hundred fence posts outa hearts of oak and to dig the postholes and set the posts up ready for Meredith to staple on his wire? And that you'll make a few dozen cords of good firewood while you're clearing the land and you'll use your horses to sled the wood up and then stack it near Meredith's house?

"Sa-a-ay—" enthusiastically—"when I spread the word out in the Valley that you've made an offer like that—won't that knock the props out from under all the lowdown gossip that's been going on about you and your family? People won't believe that you're the homesteaders' friend. 'Why, Moffitt wouldn't do all those nice things for a homesteader,' they'll say. 'That idea is the result of gossip,' I'll come back at 'em; 'the facts are that Moffitt is doing that work right now. Go up and see for yourself,' I'll tell 'em. Then I'll say, 'Moffitt's had lots of enemies up there in the hills and lots of troubles. But his heart has been in the right place all the time. It's jest dirty gossip that's ruined his reputation; he's been misjudged!'

"Now, how do you like that idea, Moffitt?"

"I like it fine—part of it—the last part of it. But your idea is sure loading a big job of work on to me and the boys."

"Well, take the idea or leave it," said Newt. "I've gotta take the whole idea with me and use it to try to persuade Meredith to string along with his neighbors and call off that wolf cub lawyer of his. I can't guarantee that it'll work. All I can do is try to make a Christian out of Meredith. I'm up here to try to make things peaceable in these parts. You're in wrong—and I'm trying to straighten things out for you. Of course, if you'd rather let things go to court—"

"Hell, no!" Moffitt exclaimed. "Mister, if you kin keep things out of the courts, me and the boys will sure live up to our end of the bargain. We'll have to do a few weeks' work what by rights we don't have to do—but we'll be gitting out of it cheap if we kin keep out of courts. We don't like courts."

"I don't blame you!" Newt grinned. "Not after what I saw and heard in the Lanesburg court. And I heard that the judge over there is related to you."

"He is—and it was his idea that we ought to let the law handle things for us."

"Well," said Newt consolingly, "you ain't the first man who got almost ruined because he had relatives who had ideas. You're lucky that I ain't related to you." He took the gold badge from his pocket and pinned it behind a coat lapel.

"Reckon I'll be leavin' you now," he said. "I've got a hard job ahead of me—trying to reason with Meredith and make him see that it'll be better all around to keep things out of the courts. I'll be back to let you know about it. So long."

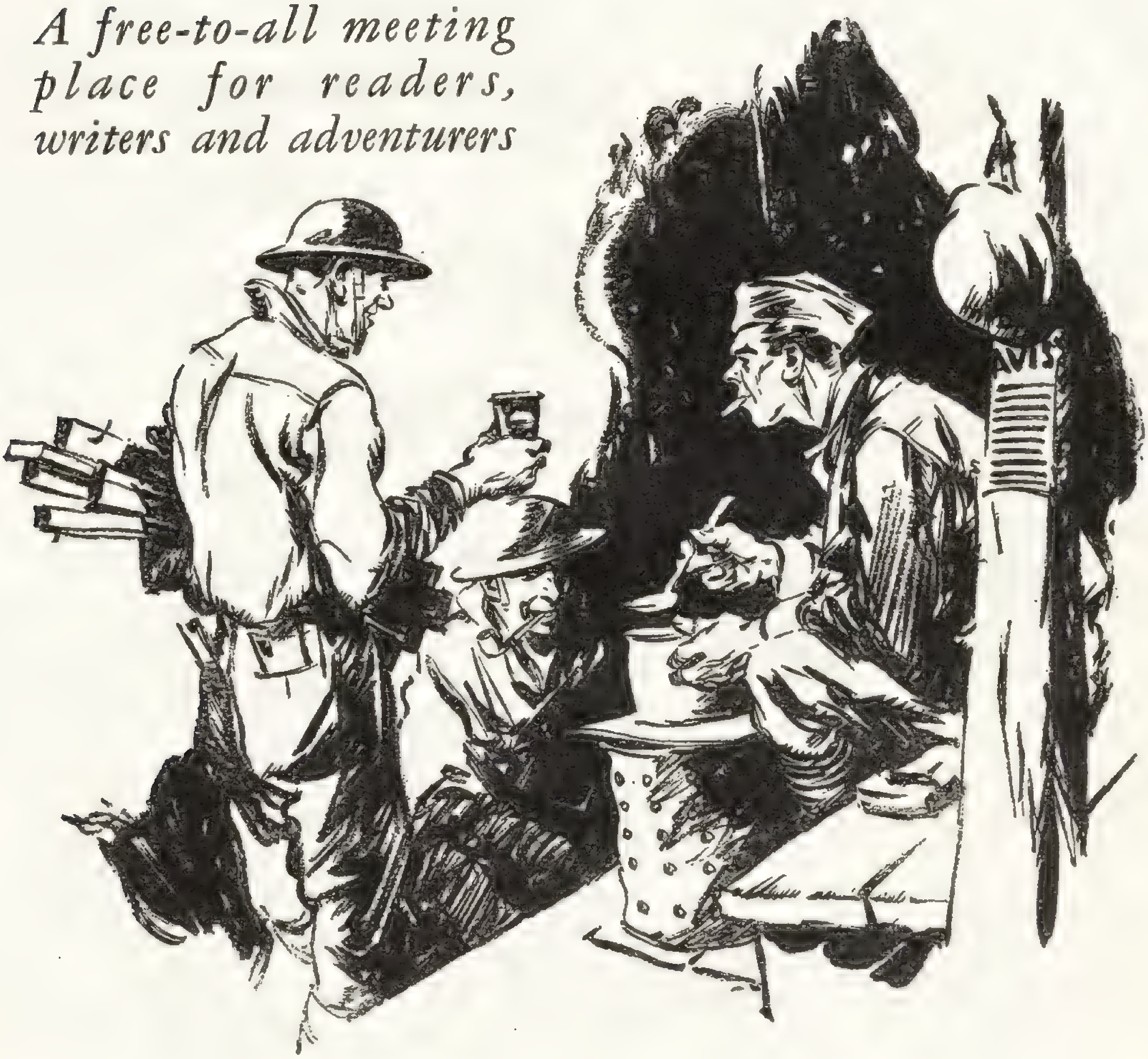
Newt rode away, severely restraining a chuckle.

"Newt, you danged old liar!" he addressed himself a little later. "You oughta be ashamed of yourself. But I reckon you did right, at that. Nawthin' kin be proved against the clan except that they got up in court and swore that they identified Meredith. But that was a big enough peg to hang a team of horses on. And you sure hung it, Newt; you sure hung it plenty!

"The hell of it is that I settled things too danged smooth and peaceable. Thirty years ago—" He sighed regretfully. He pulled out his Colt and looked at it. "Yeh, thirty years ago—" he repeated. "Newt, I reckon you're gittin' old!" Another sigh. "But not so old at that!" A big grin. "Thirty years ago you didn't have the brains to think up them whoppers you told today. The hell of it," he added, "is that the boys in Omaha probably won't believe me when I tell 'em the truth about the lies I told!"

The CAMP-FIRE

A free-to-all meeting place for readers, writers and adventurers



FROM the Eternal City comes this welcome communication from Harold Lamb. Perhaps Mr. Gardner of our A. A. staff, or some other reader whose hobby is edged weapons, can refer him to authentic crusade pieces.

Has any one ever seen a real crusader's sword? I'd like to know about it, if they have.

I've been wandering around most of the Near East, following out the various routes taken by the crusaders to and from Jerusalem, while writing that long narrative of the crusades. The first volume, they tell me, is to be published in March.

Anyway, so many people have lugged out "real crusaders' swords" for my inspection, that I'm wondering if such a thing exists. The period of the great east-bound crusades begins in 1095 and ends about 1300. Two hundred years. Of course there were later expeditions that never got beyond Europe. And a sword belonging to a knight of Malta as late as 1650 might be called a crusader's sword. But does a blade survive, anywhere, with an authentic story dating back even to 1400—the time of Tamerlane and the crusade of Nicopolis that was wrecked by the Turkish Janissaries?

I've seen some massive two handed affairs, German, in the armory of the Ducal palace, Venice. But these were sixteenth century. In the mass of weapons piled together in the Museum of the Janissaries, Constantinople, there are dozens of helmets, breastplates, that the Turkish custodians swore were taken from the crusaders. These also were sixteenth century, I think. By the way, the Janissaries gathered together some gorgeous trophies—even two British battle flags. I asked where these came from, and they said Gallipoli.

At Beirut that collector of curios, Van Heidenstam, has an old sword brought him by some children who dug it out of a mound. It looks like a small ceremonial sword, again of the sixteenth century, but he believes it to be a crusader's weapon. He has about everything in his cabinets—everything except the sling-stone that laid Goliath low, and the corner-stone of Atlantis.

The sword and spurs shown to visitors at the Sepulcher in Jerusalem, and said to have been Godfrey of Bouillon's, do not seem to me to be authentic. In Godfrey's time the blades were broader, and tapered little toward the tip: cross-pieces were short, and the pommels of the hilts heavy. The priest who got it out said that the wooden hilt pieces also were original, which is almost impossible. Probably Godfrey's sword was kept there at his tomb for a long time, but was lost or stolen and the present blade was put in its place. I don't know, of course, but it does not seem likely that the sword would have survived intact after Godfrey's sarcophagus was lost, with most of the other treasures of the Sepulcher.

The only authentic pieces I have seen—authentic as to age, that is—were several blades of the fourteenth and very late thirteenth century, and these were badly eroded, only the stem of the blade surviving.

The helmets have fared better. I've seen some splendid early Turkish and Mamluke helmets, including the one belonging to Bayazid the Thunder. And Muhammad the Conqueror, who took Constantinople. But of the weapons of the crusaders nothing seems to exist, earlier than the time of Sulaiman the Magnificent and the knights of Malta—early sixteenth century.

—HAROLD LAMB, Albergo Boston, Rome, Italy.

* * *

WHEN General Rafael de Nogales, whose intensely interesting personal reminiscences have been appearing in our pages, stopped off in New York City, he dropped in on us one day and introduced himself to the staff. A most dynamic little man, he is as colorful in his speech and manner as he is with his pen. In fact, just the sort of character you would expect from his surprising motto. Remember it? "When you hear of a war, go to it!" And of course he lives up to it strenuously, having fought in more wars than anybody we ever heard of.

Of his future plans he never speaks. He dropped a hint that he might have to leave the States at any moment, but when one of us asked him where his next destination might be, he assumed a blank look that was as humorous as it was uninformative. Humorous because his ordinary look is anything but blank. However, the secret is out. We've just received a card, mailed from Belize, Honduras, and here's what it says:

After starting a big row in Honduras to liberate some Nicaraguan deserters, I am leaving today for Yucatan by way of Quintana-Roo. Best regards.

Which may or may not indicate that they are due for a little excitement down that way. Anyway, our best wishes follow him on the trail!

* * *

A READER questioned some of the submarine details in Georges Surdez's story, "Off Shore." We sent the letter on to Mr. Surdez in Oran. Though both his reply and the original letter of complaint are quite bulky, I am printing them entire because of their unusual contents and because—I must confess—both are so full of spirit. The gentlemen are probably both right; the trouble seems to be the old one of trying to make one's own general experience coincide with the particular conditions imposed on a particular situation in fiction. It doesn't always work.

First, quoting from Mr. Surdez's letter to this office:

Sending you back Mr. Lawrence's letter and carbon of my answer, I believe you will be satisfied with my answers to his questions. There are two submarine errors in the yarn, by the way, which he did not pick out. The 155m. gun is too heavy for a Körting type U-boat. The hint given that America is already in the War creates an anachronism of a few months, Körting type subs having been assigned to training duty in 1916. I was aware of those "errors" when I wrote the story "Off Shore." I shall not be foolish enough to outline to you, experienced as you are in the writing trade, my reasons for disregarding exact facts in those two cases.

Mr. Lawrence's letter:

In the October first number of *Adventure,* you published a story called "Off Shore," by Georges Surdez, that indicates a very slight knowledge of submarines by the author and which I feel compelled to criticize in a friendly way, seeing that I was forced into a grand argument recently while in the American Hospital here, the immediate result thereof being a general rise of temperature, which was bad for all hands and made the nurses nervous. People sure have weird ideas about subs.

Before going any further I will state that I am an old-timer in the U. S. Submarine Service, now retired after 20 years' service, having served on the F-2, H-3 and K-7 as gunner's mate 2nd and 1st class, chief gunner's mate and Ensign and later as instructor at the Submarine School at New London, Conn., where I made a study of all types of submarines, allied and enemy, theory and practise, for three and a half years.

My sub experience started in 1912 and ended in Dec. 1921, when I resigned my commission as Lieutenant (junior grade), so I claim to know whereof I speak, as in addition to my regular duties, I was custodian of the very latest secret and confidential reports of all submarine activities.

I would suggest that Mr. Surdez confine himself to his French Legion stories which are excellent, giving one an accurate and instructive account of the Legion and Northern Africa or he should at least dig up more dope before trying to get seagoing. (I just returned from a 9 months' stay in Morocco and talked with many Legionnaires.)

Gasoline as fuel was never in favor on subs due to the evil effect of the burnt gases on the crew, besides the other dangers. I have seen the engineers on our earlier boats hauled out of the engine room dead to the world for a time, sometimes passing out on their feet on that account. Therefore Diesel engines were installed as soon as they became practical, which was some time before the war, and the Germans were the leaders in this field, their engines being far superior to ours, until we learned better after the War.

The few gasoline driven subs, that the Germans may have had in commission at the outbreak of the War, were small and of hardly any value and the cruising radius too limited to permit them to pass north of Scotland and return or even through the English Channel; and even if the gasoline held out for a trip of two weeks, the question of food and water was always a problem, because everything in a sub has its appointed place and stowage space is limited, so having the interior cluttered up with food, there would be no room for the crew, let alone trying to handle the vessel on the surface or submerged. This only applies to the old small boats. The new ones are palaces compared to them.

Now! There never was a submarine skipper insane enough to try to refuel in enemy waters from five gallon tins. It can and has been done, but in port, as anyone ever on the K-347 and 8 can tell you, but what a messy, slow, back-breaking job to open the wooden cases, slide or pass the tins onto the submarine, chop the cans open and dump into the fuel filling lines. It took us about 4 or 5 hours, if I remember right, to take 5,000 gallons. This happened in Acapulco, Mexico, in the fall of 1917 while on our way from Honolulu to Key West and we had Diesels. So I object to the misleading statement that gasoline is the blood of undersea craft.

Also I never heard of such poor shooting by any naval gun crew, not even aboard a submarine, as described. According to the story it lasted 90 minutes against an old tub. The Germans always could shoot as many of our boys know to their cost.

Then again, no sub commander would be idiotic enough to get within rifle range when he could simply stand off out of range and batter the windjammer to pieces with a few well placed shots and not strain the resources of the German Empire seriously. Who would be fool enough to risk a trained submarine crew in a stunt of that kind?

One more objection and then I will pipe down. Where in the name of Von Tirpitz would this blessed sub stow a boat large enough to carry 7 men in a moderate sea and how many boatloads of foodstuff would they have had to transfer to make it worth while, and who ever heard of a German sub crew doing the heavy work when all they had to do was demand the Frenchman's crew and boats for that? They were not especially polite on either side during the War and especially when pressed for time.

I am sorry to put up such a yowl but it was a bit too thick to let pass and the author was only floundering about out of his depth, so maybe he will be a bit more cautious next time as it is a shame to spoil *Adventure* with rubbish and especially when good reading matter in English is so hard to get for us that wander over the face of the globe.

This is not a protest from a would be wise guy trying to show off, so please take this in the friendly spirit offered.

I can always be found through the American Legion, Paris Post No. 1, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, Benjamin Franklin Post 605 or the U. S. Consul, 1 rue des Italiens, Paris, France, in case anyone should wish to communicate with me.

—F. A. LAWRENCE.

Mr. Surdez's reply:

The editor of *Adventure* has sent me your letter. I take good note of your lengthy experience with undersea crafts, twenty years, of your rank in the U. S. Navy. Nevertheless, I regret to state that your knowledge conflicts with historical events.

The comparatively successful encounter of sailing ship with submarine, described in "Off Shore," occurred. The ship *La Marthe,* French, commanded by Captain Yves Leff, a Breton, fought a U-boat off the French Coast, for much longer than the ninety minutes I granted, escaped under cover of night, sank before dawn. Captain Leff, who is an old friend of mine, was cited for his valor and skill, received the rank of Knight in the Legion of Honor and the War Cross with Palm.

La Marthe fought for no other reason than that her commander had a rather strong belief that his flag should not be hauled down without a little row—being a Breton. The submarine was striving to sink her and failed. That rather answers your skepticism concerning the shooting of the German gunners. Moreover, if you will be fair enough to look at the story you will note that I wrote "placed as if with the hand" of the last three shells fired by the submarine, when reason to spare her had passed. Even His Imperial Majesty's gunners could not ask for a handsomer compliment.

You protest the use of gasoline. A mate on the ship *Dieppedale* told me of his being on another ship, the name of which escapes me—ten years have elapsed—which was stopped by a German submarine, in 1917. He related that before the bombing crew placed explosives in the hold, a cargo of gasoline was seized, transferred. If you read French, purchase Charles-Roux's memoirs (Armand Colin, Paris) and see what that staff-officer in the Dardanelles Expedition has to say on page 208: "If our information is right, the German submarines operating here are refueled by Greek ships or steamers, of which several have already been taken by our squadrons. There are presumed to be gasoline depots in the Islands of the Archipelago and in the ports of Greece." I translate *essence:* "gasoline."

You state that gasoline driven submarines were replaced before the War by Diesel motored crafts. You have forgotten the existence of the Körting motor. Such an obsolete submarine as the U-9, which sank three British cruisers at one stroke, was equipped with Körting motors, four of them. The fuel employed was kerosene, but I believe, and you must know, that the Körting would run with gasoline also, or even with a mixture of the two fluids, kerosene and gasoline. Air came through the kiosk and was expelled through a long funnel. The U-9 could make cruises of a month's duration; remained out three weeks and more several times.

As you were studying submarine operations during the War, may I remind you that once in the Atlantic, Spain was not far off. Need I inform you that fuel could be obtained by submarines near Spain? Fuel, food, and it has been said, even ammunition. I took it for granted that when the sailor told me "gasoline was requisitioned," the fluid was to be employed as fuel for the motors and not to get grease off the white ducks. I knew of the existence of the Diesel motor, even knew that the fuel used was crude oil. What you mistook for carelessness and ignorance was, sad to relate, sticking to facts as I heard them.

You state that "there never was a submarine skipper insane enough to try to refuel in enemy waters from five gallon tins." You inform me that you had seen it done in port. Am I reckless in saying that many things that can be done in port in peace time can be undertaken at sea in war time? As I have told you, it is not even in question, for it was actually done. You accuse me of not doing enough research work when you have evidently not read such a classic as Naval Lieutenant Johannes Spiess' memoirs. Spiess served but six years on a submarine, or on submarines, but all that time in active, in war service. Pick up his book and read that he remained seven hours beside a torpedoed vessel, waiting for her to sink, and in the North Sea, reputed rather more dangerous for U-boats than the Atlantic. You inform me yourself that in five hours 5000 gallons can be taken on. 5000 gallons mean something to an alert submarine commander, sincerely eager to continue his work.

READ "Off Shore" with attention. The young chap who boards the French vessel says that he knows where the patrol boats are located, when they may be expected. The one that comes later, you will admit, may have been attracted by an hour and a half of gun firing. Such knowledge on the part of submarine men was not rare. Here in Algeria, you can learn that on the lonely stretch of coast east of Mostaganem, German submarines working the Mediterranean Sea sent men ashore for water—that farmers were even accused of selling them fresh food. Surprised citizens beheld submarines in small coves of the French Atlantic Coast, saw the crew bathing.

As for daring to chance the sudden appearance of a destroyer, do you still cling to the idea of the spectacled German with the porcelain pipe and the bier stein, the methodical, placid man? The Germans were methodical, admitted, but they also proved excellent gamblers. Fearing to seem trite, I shall not give you examples. Let us consider the risk, anyway: Destroyer signaled. Although he had started to take on the gasoline (read crude oil, if you wish), no law forced the commander to finish. The submarine could dive immediately. Then what? Remember that when the story takes place, the depth-bomb was not in use. The first reported to the German Admiralty was by the U-49, on May 4th, 1917. In any event, regardless of danger, submarine commanders were instructed to remain out as long as possible, to wreak all the damage they could. With such orders, I dislike to think an American officer would not have risked a long gamble.

The labor attached to breaking up the cases and ripping the tins? Read "Off Shore"—the young officer orders the Frenchman's crew to do the dirty work. Coming within rifle range? Read "Off Shore." The mental condition of the commander is described before he gives that rash order. Risking a trained submarine crew? If you ever got struck in the nose by a man you knew was a better scrapper than you, you are aware that anger sometimes leads to unwise actions. Spiess says that he once brought the U-19 to the surface, in a fit of anger, at the risk of close fire.

"Where in the name of Von Tirpitz (*hoch-hoch!*) would this blessed sub stow a boat large enough to carry 7 men?" You know where submarines carry small boats—I won't match trade words with you. Read Spiess sometime—he sent four men ashore on an island north of Scotland, to bring four sheep back. From four or five men who had seen submarines operating close (always preceding a promenade on life rafts) I have heard the number of men in the boat sent by the sub as from six to seven men. They may have been crowded.

"Why did he (the sub commander) not ask the Frenchman to send a boat?" Read Spiess. Subs hated sailing vessels, always likely to prove traps. Men rush to lower the boat asked for, covering the moves of others who bruskly unmasked a nice naval gun of heavy caliber. Spiess will inform you that he placed his wrecking squad in his small boat and towed for ten kilometers—tied to his periscope—to avoid approaching a sailing ship on the surface. One gathers from his pages that submarine commanders grew to doubt human kindness and sincerity.

"How many boatloads of foodstuff would they have to transfer to make it worth while?" You are either kidding or you have never been hungry for fresh food. About ten years ago, in Grand Lahou, Ivory Coast, I used to risk crossing the surf (ask those who know whether that was taking a chance) to go aboard the sailing ship *La Bruyère*, commanded by Captain Leff (yes, the same one), to get a change from the eternal fish and goatmeat dinners, from the breakfasts of tinned sausages. You say yourself that submarines grow short of food. Moreover, didn't you hear that Germany was short of food? Men who served on German submarines have told me that lard, butter, cheese, bottled goods, even in small quantities, were eagerly taken. That the young officer asked for soap might have given you a clue. And, as long as I had a boat with seven men in it, it wouldn't sink for a few pounds of fat, of chocolate, or the added weight of bottled liquors.

You suggest that he (the sub commander) could simply have stood off out of range and battered the windjammer to pieces with a few well placed shots and not have strained the *resources of the German Empire.* If the sub commander had had the "resources of the German Empire aboard"—you inform me yourself that space is extremely limited on a submarine using gasoline—he would not have needed gasoline, he would not have needed food, and he would have acted accordingly. But the German Empire and its resources were far away, beyond the Channel patrols. Read Spiess some day; he is informative. You shall then learn how careful a submarine commander, in active service, was of his shells. Do you know that his chiefs even expected a given percentage of hits for the torpedoes trusted to him? And, anyway, I gave you your "few well placed shots" long before you asked for them. Three shots, "placed as if by hand" or words to that effect. Three shots—three good shots, of which any gun crew might be proud.

Gasoline, taking on of fuel, poor shooting, rifle range, boat business, food, all answered according to facts.

I was not beyond my depth, I had done my research work. So careful was I, Mr. Lawrence, that for the few orders given by the sailing ship commander to his crew, I asked a friend's advice. Served his apprenticeship in sail, couple of times around the Horn. Later a Lieutenant in the U. S. Navy, navigating officer of convoys, twice since the War mentioned for distinguished services at sea. Far from being ignorantly eager to display a knowledge of the sea, and tempting though the writing of it would have been, I was very brief in my description of the actual combat. For, although I may disregard your advice and sometime try sea stories again, I know my limits. Have I read books on submarines? Two fears dominate all others in me: That of being bitten by a snake, that of going down in a submarine and staying down. I react normally, and grab everything printed on snakes and submarines as soon as I see it.

Glad you wrote in. Thanks about the nice things you say about my Legion stories. Your letter was obviously written to let out steam after a hot argument, so I understand perfectly how you felt. Now, come on, are you going to tell me that a yarn spoils *Adventure* when it starts a row in a hospital? I'm getting out of the above address on the first. Going home, probably. Read Spiess and drop me a line care of the magazine.

—GEORGES SURDEZ

* * *

SUPPOSE a stranger should write you telling you he intended to cross the whole continent of Asia, south to north, right up to Behring Sea; thence through the entire length of Alaska to Canada. Suppose he said he intended to do all this overland travel on horseback. Well, I leave it to you. When I received Dr. Starek's first letter—I forget from what place—I felt just as you might under the same circumstances. But he asked for information about Alaska, so in the course of things I referred him to Mr. T. S. Solomons of "Ask Adventure," and imagined I'd heard the last of *that* project. Now just scan the following from Mr. Solomons:

> Among my last batch of A. A. letters was a long one from a Dr. J. Starek, an Austrian who, with his wife, was—and is—making a round-the-world journey on horseback. He appears to be a sort of scientist, a man of means, and certainly one of indefatigable energy and patience. He wanted advance information as to crossing from Asia into Alaska and being able to ride through the north down to New York and the Butterick Bldg. (That's an addendum of my own.) I gave him the info of course, and almost forgot about him till he turned up the other day

with a new and longer letter from Bangkok, Siam. He and his wife and their servants and twenty-three ponies floundered up to their chins (literally their chins some of the time!) in liquid mud in the jungles of Siam, making 175 miles in 109 days! While the Siamese grins (not twins) followed them everywhere. Wild beasts stole their provisions and they did this Brobdignagian wallow on *rice*, pure, straight and simple!

He's going to go to Java on a side trip and then he starts from Singapore with his ponies, trekking northward through China and Siberia to Behring Sea. He expects to use up about four more years on his trip, he having been out of Vienna about four and a half already. He gets the chief of police or the highest official of the town or city through which he passes to sign on the dotted line of his diary or whatever he uses, so he authenticates his actual journeying and its route as he goes. He's got Horthy (of Austria), Mustapha Kemal Pasha, Trotzky and Stahlin and a whole bunch of potentates and other mugs, and he has taken movie film and stills and close-ups innumerable of strange peoples through Asia. This is just touching a few high spots. There is no doubt he's in the thick of a very Homeric undertaking.

And a few days ago I received another note from Dr. Starek. He writes:

> Many thanks for having forwarded my question letter to Mr. Solomons concerning overland travels from Siberia to Alaska and then through the entire length of Alaska to Canada. We are immensely glad to have received so ample information that a stone has been lifted off our chest, for although we crossed unknown east Arabia, Pamir, the big Mongolian desert Taklan-Makan, Tibet, and last but not least, climbed over the Himalayas through passes which no European ever crossed, as we took great care to keep off the beaten trails of Dr. Sven Hedin, Younghusband, Preshevalsky, et cetera. We had no information at all about Behring Sea and Alaska, which we now got so amply and exhaustively that we don't know how to thank you.
>
> We will strictly adhere to the advices of Mr. Solomons and have only one wish left, to thank you personally on our arrival on horseback in New York.
>
> We would be glad to get your magazine regularly but don't know how to do it; couldn't you give us advice? As long as we traveled in India and Burma it was comparatively easy to buy *Adventure* in the book-stalls, but not so in Siam. I found only the other day the September and December edition of 1926 in a second-hand book shop.
>
> Of course once we arrive in British Malaya where we also plan to go it will be again easy, but nevertheless you would oblige us to advise us how to get the magazine directly by parcel post from New York. We would be prepared to pay a year in advance, i.e., for the whole edition 1929. We would send you the money and you wait till we inform you where to send the parcel; for 1930 we would do the same, and you are free to send us every three months the magazine to a certain town ahead, so that we pick up our magazine in passing through the town.
>
> If all goes well we hope to arrive in Nome during summer, 1932, as it will take us some three months riding from Bangkok to Singapore, three months through Java, one year across Australia and one year from Vladivostok to the Gulf of Anadir on the Arctic Sea, and thence to Nome in Alaska. From Nome to New York we think it will take us three years including hibernating twice in Alaska. So it won't be before 1935 till we will have the honor to express our thanks to the editing staff of *Adventure* Magazine.
>
> We would indeed be glad to get some few lines from you to Singapore, Dr. Starek, c/o German Consul. Very sincerely yours,
>
> —DR. J. B. STAREK.
>
> N.B. Tomorrow, 19/11/29, we ride from Bangkok direction Hua-Hin, Penang, Kwala Sampur, Malacca, Singapore, Batavia, Surabaya, where we will take the steamer for Port Darwin in Australia.

P.S. The whole edition of 1929 has already been mailed to Singapore, with the compliments of *Adventure.*

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WELL, the readers' votes are tabulated, and the results follow. Though the list is limited to the fifty authors who received the greatest number, it ought to be kept in mind that many others whose names do not appear in the list also received votes. In fairness to all concerned let us remember, too, that the number of stories a writer has published in the magazine during the year may have more than a little to do with his popularity. Thus the man who is represented by but one or two stories is naturally under a memory handicap, as far as readers are concerned. Memory is important also from another angle: Recent stories are of course fresher in the readers' minds than those read several months before.

But all in all, we feel the results tell a fairly reliable story. There is scarcely any mistake to be made about your favorites. They'll all be with us in full force in future issues.

Many thanks for your generous response in this vote. It was certainly splendid.

The Vote

1. W. C. Tuttle
2. Arthur O. Friel
3. Harold Lamb
4. Talbot Mundy
5. H. Bedford-Jones
6. Ared White
7. Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson
8. Georges Surdez
9. B. M. Bower
10. William Corcoran
11. Allan Vaughan Elston
12. Gordon Young
13. Hugh Pendexter
14. J. D. Newsom
15. Clements Ripley
16. Thomson Burtis
17. James B. Hendryx
18. George E. Holt
19. Robert Carse
20. F. St. Mars
21. James W. Bennett
22. H. P. S. Greene
23. Raymond S. Spears
24. F. R. Buckley
25. E. S. Dellinger
26. Albert R. Wetjen
27. Sidney Herschel Small
28. Frank J. Schindler
29. Andrew Caffrey
30. Bill Adams
31. Bertrand W. Sinclair
32. Captain Dingle
33. R. V. Gery
34. Chester L. Saxby
35. Rafael de Nogales
36. Karl Detzer
37. William West Winter
38. T. S. Stribling
39. Frederick Moore
40. Ferdinand Berthoud
41. Walt Coburn
42. Foster-Harris
43. Larry Barretto
44. Eugene Stebbings
45. Charles Gilson
46. L. G. Blochman
47. E. Van Lier Ribbink
48. Reginald Campbell
49. Ralph R. Perry
50 James Stevens

Most Popular Short Stories

1. "The Faring Forth" by Harold Lamb
2. "One Mile Thick" by Chester L. Saxby
3. "The Gunstore Rat" by Raymond S. Spears
4. "Whisky Jack, M.D." by R. V. Gery

Most Popular Novelettes

1. "An Enemy of Society" by J. D. Newsom
2. "The Spy Trap" by Ared White
3. "Rainbow Chasers" by Hugh Pendexter
4. "Lost Empire" by Robert Carse

Most Popular Complete Novels

1. "The Enchanted Hill" by Arthur O. Friel
2. "Mystery Lake" by Allan Vaughan Elston
3. "The Song of Death" by Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson
4. "Wolf Bait" by William West Winter

Most Popular Serials

1. "Dust And Sun" by Clements Ripley
2. "The Invisible Guns of Kabul" by Talbot Mundy
3. "Man Of The North" by James B. Hendryx
4. "The Doublecross" by Gordon Young

WITH the last issue, Anthony M. Rud, who presided over the Camp-Fire for over two years—and excellently well he did it, too—resigned from the editorship of *Adventure*. He is succeeded by the present writer, whose name appended below will not, I know, be entirely new to some of you. At least not to the men of "Ask Adventure" of which department I've been in charge since 1927. And certainly not to most of our writers' brigade, with whom I've been in more or less constant correspondence over a period of years, both as assistant editor under Arthur Sullivant Hoffman, and as managing editor under Joseph Cox and Anthony Rud. So you can see, I'm something of an old-timer myself.

First off I want to make clear that we plan no radical changes of any kind in *Adventure*. In its present format and in the kind of stories we print, I think (and I'm sure all of you will agree wholeheartedly) *Adventure* is unbeatable. It has always been a magazine of distinction, and I shall spare no effort to keep it so. Perhaps, with your loyal cooperation, we can manage to make it even better than it is. I admit it will be no mean job to do this.

Beyond this, let us keep the Camp-Fire brightly burning. Within the circle of its friendly light men and women, from far and near, have never failed to find recreation and pleasure. Usually they have discovered as well, among our members, such a measure of sympathy and mutual understanding as they probably could not find in any like meeting-place on the face of the earth. Newcomers are constantly telling us the Camp-Fire is unique. May it continue always to breathe forth the precious spirit of adventure!

—A. A. PROCTOR.

ASK Adventure

For Free Information and Services You Can't Get Elsewhere

Gold

A MURDER mystery that started a rumor of a strike.

Request:—"I have heard recently of the gold regions in a country called 'Nihanni' and would like to know its whereabouts.

All I've heard of it is that it's in the Flat River country, which leads me to believe that it's somewhere in North America."

—FRED H. WENDT, Culver City, Cal.

Reply, by Mr. Victor Shaw:—That the Nihanni River is somewhere in North America is right.

It flows into the Mackenzie River below the Flat River and rises in the Continental Divide almost due east from the headwaters of the Pelly River, which as you know flows into the upper Yukon, forming a junction with the Lewes at Selkirk. All that country is practically unexplored, although prospectors have penetrated that easterly watershed from the south and Fort Simpson.

Reports of rich gold strikes on the Nihanni and vicinity seem to have little or no foundation, from recent examinations. Keele, of the Canadian Geological Survey, reports that this area is unfavorable for the prospector, which bears out McConnel's report of a reconnaissance in 1887. Mr. W. J. Langham, after a recent trip through the whole region makes the statements that the entire country "from the Pelly to the Nihanni has been greatly glaciated, with glacial moraines to be seen in all large valleys. We could find no placer gold, nor did any assay of pyrites show a trace of gold. If gold is so plentiful as has been affirmed, then my companions and myself are dead ones."

It was to Big Nihanni Creek that the McLeod brothers were killed by a family of Nihanni Indians, (or they are credited) about 1904. It was also this family of killers who were later credited with the murder of a Swede, the partner of one William Atchison, who were prospecting. The skeleton of the Swede dressed in winter rig was discovered by Poole Fields, a Mounted Policeman. The Swede had obviously been shot as he was coming up the trail to his cabin and had attempted to defend himself, as his rifle was found at half-cock with a cartridge in the chamber. These details were secured from Fields at Ross Post in 1919. Atchison surmised his partner (the Swede) had discovered gold, so he had two men, Brown and Rae, make investigations when they were in there in 1921. They were unable to find any evidence of gold, they reported.

The general formation of the Flat River country is reported to be granite, limestone and slate. Its topography is that of a high plateau traversed by many canyons of several hundred feet in depth. The latest searches could pan no gold, neither in this section nor on the westerly watershed of the Divide along Coal Creek, Hyland River, Frances Lake to the source of the Pelly.

Since the Nihanni River is in the very heart of an unexplored Canadian wilderness, and is hard to reach, doubtless the fact has given the yarns about rich gold deposits a more rosy hue than the facts warrant.

Broncho

HE MUST be blocky, short coupled and quicker than a cat.

Request:—"1. What is the weight of the average cowhorse, the type used in the steer roping events at rodeos or on the range?

2. How many hands high is the above horse?
3. What is a good cowhorse worth?"

—AL ANDERSON, Brooklyn, N. Y.

Reply, by Mr. Thomas H. Dameron:—1. The weight of the average cowhorse is 950 to 1050 pounds, the latter being preferable. He must be blocky, short coupled and quicker than a cat.

2. The average in height is fifteen hands or fifteen hands two inches. I have seen a few good ones that were fourteen hands two inches.

3. A good cowhorse is worth his weight in gold to his rider-owner. On the market they bring from $75 to $150. Individuals changing hands among cowmen or performers may go as high as $1000 to $1500.

Coins

TARNISH, and suggestions for its removal.

Request:—"I have several proof silver 3c pieces that have become stained to about steel color from the envelopes they were kept in. Is there any way of removing the stain without damaging the coins? How can I keep others of the same lot from getting stained?

How can one get proof coins from the mint and what is the extra charge for a penny?"—H. E. HIGGINS, Ellsworth, Me.

Reply, by Mr. Howland Wood:—Your tarnished proof coins present somewhat of a problem in the way of cleaning. As a rule, only an expert should attempt this kind of a job. Perhaps the best process is by electricity. The next best method is by using a weak solution of potassium cynide, which is a deadly poison and difficult to obtain. If you should use this method, a second's immersion in the solution is probably all that would be needed. A third way would be to use a little ammonia in water. This will take off some of the tarnish. But whichever method you adopt, do not rub the surface of the coins in any way, as by so doing you would injure the proof surface.

One or two dealers claim to have a non-tarnishing tissue paper. I think Mr. Hesslein, 101 Tremont Street, Boston, has this paper, and I am enclosing a list of dealers, as I think it would be advantageous for you to have such a list.

The mint no longer makes proof coins, but by writing to the Treasury Department, you can obtain new coins of the current year.

Kayak

THOUGH a light craft, a kayak requires heavier stays than bamboo to stand the strain of frequent impacts.

Request:—"Could you please answer these questions?

1. Where could I get plans or building instructions for a kayak?

2. Is a kayak safer than a canoe in rough water?

3. Could bamboo be used in the construction of it?" —HENRY HELWIG, New York, N. Y.

Reply, by Mr. Edgar S. Perkins:—1. There is no place in United States that I know of where you can obtain building instructions for a kayak. The only possible place would be Germany, and I regret to say I could not tell you where; perhaps our German expert listed in the magazine can tell you where to write to over there for such information.

2. If properly handled, a kayak is safer and drier in rough water than an open canoe. The reason for this is that the beam is nearly double that of the ordinary canoe when you have sufficient weight in the canoe to bring the water line up.

3. No, I do not advocate the use of bamboo in a kayak. It does not have sufficient rigidity along the sides. The one I have, which is practically a duplicate of those made in Germany and other foreign countries, is made of round oak doweling with a sliding sleeve in each end so that the dowels can be turned into each other tightly and form a rigid construction with such elasticity to take up the strain from an impact. I do not believe that bamboo would serve the purpose, as it is not stiff enough to hold out the skin of the kayak.

Army Aviation

WITHOUT a college or university course, it is becoming increasingly difficult to take advantage of the flying training offered in the Army. And without a complete record of a man's ability, character and physical qualifications, it is impossible even to hint what chance he might have to work up from the ranks.

Request:—"Desiring information concerning Army aviation, I should greatly appreciate your answering the following questions:

1. What are the qualifications and terms of enlistment in the aviation branch of the U. S. Army?

2. What are the chances of a recruit becoming a pilot during the terms of enlistment?

3. Would you personally advise a young man 23 years of age on such a course?

4. Where may one offer oneself for enlistment?" —FRED E. STADLER, Atlantic City, N. J.

Reply, by Capt. Glen R. Townsend:—1. Qualifications for enlistment in the Air Service are the same as for other branches of the regular Army. Briefly, the qualifications are that the applicant must be a citizen of the United States of good moral character, between the ages of 18 and 35, able to read and write the English language, without dependents, free from disease and in sound physical condition. The term of enlistment is three years, but men without previous service in the regular Army or the National Guard in Federal service, may make their initial enlistment for one year.

2. Enlisted men are not rated as pilots in the Army (with certain exceptions not applying to recruits), and the only way a man could become a pilot would be through obtaining an appointment as flying cadet and completing the course at the Army flying schools when he would be commissioned as a 2nd lieutenant in the Air Corps Reserve and probably have an opportunity for commission in the

regular Army. Qualified enlisted men are given preference in the appointments as Flying Cadets, but the standards are now very high and an education equivalent to a college or university course is practically essential to obtain an appointment.

3. With no information of your ability, character or physical qualifications I could not hope to give you any advice which would be worth anything at all. For some men enlistment in the Army would open up fine opportunities; for others it would be a waste of time. I am sending you under separate cover a booklet which gives quite complete and accurate information about service in the Army and which may help you reach a decision.

4. There are recruiting offices for the Army in practically all large cities. You will probably find one in the post office of the Federal Building at Atlantic City, or the postmaster can direct you.

The Crawl Stroke

WHY IT is the best all around style of swimming, for prizes or for pleasure.

Request:—"Learning that you are the man who developed Gertrude Ederle into a champion swimmer, I am taking advantage of this opportunity to obtain some information I have been wanting to know for a long time.

1. In Grantland Rice's motion picture 'Sportlight', Gertrude Ederle was training for her Channel swim; she was running and skipping rope to improve her wind.

Do you approve of a swimmer running to develop wind?

2. Is the 'crawl stroke' and 'flutter kick' the best all-round way to swim?

3. Will standing on both feet and bending the trunk parallel to the floor, and going through the arm and upper body motion of the 'crawl stroke' (also lying on the floor or bed and imitating the 'flutter kick'), help acquire form, if facilities for swimming are not to be had?

4. Can you suggest any setting-up exercise that will help loosen my muscles up and put them in shape for swimming.

5. What are the requirements for entrance into the Junior and Senior Red Cross Life Saving Corps? May entrance be obtained without belonging to an organization like an Athletic Club or Y. M. C. A? If so, how?" —J. H. DOVER, Keokuk, Iowa.

Reply, by Mr. Louis De B. Handley:—1. In training for swimming I do not think it advisable to take any form of exercise which tends to harden the muscles. While preparing for her Channel trials Miss Ederle did not run and skip rope. In fact, she even cut down on her walking, at my suggestion. The motion picture people evidently induced her to do "stunt" work, in order to give that film some variety.

2, 3, 4. Swimming is the only perfect method of training for a swimmer and I do not approve of running to develop "wind".

Of course, if facilities for swimming are unavailable, as in your case, land exercises are better than nothing. It will help the leg action to stretch out supine—preferably on bed or couch, and indulge in the crawl thrash; it will improve arm stroke and wind to go through the arm movements and breathing in standing position, bent forward.

There is no question that the crawl is the best all around stroke. It requires less effort and yields more speed than any other, so it is obviously advantageous to use it, whether one is to use it for racing, recreation, exercise or self-protection. All the world's records have been made with it and its devotees always gain the highest honors in important long distance contests.

5. Anyone may take the Red Cross junior and senior lifesaving tests. It is not necessary to belong to any particular organization. If you write to Capt. Charles Scully, Lifesaving Institute, American Red Cross, New York, he will be glad to let you know what the tests consist of and give you the name and address of some examiner in your city.

.48 Caliber Revolver

MR. WIGGINS has his doubts as to the existence of this massive sidearm.

Request:—"Nearly thirty years ago, while in a small Mexican town near Las Vegas, New Mex., I examined and fired an enormous revolver of forty-eight caliber, made by the Smith & Wesson people.

This arm had an amazing range and its recoil was hardly that of the forty-five Colt of the period. The owner and my good friend, Cornelio Tafoya, informed me the gun was brought to the U. S. by his father from Mexico, and that it was not on sale in the U. S. but had been made for the Russian military. In fact I believe it had 'Russian Model' stamped on top of the long barrel with the usual Smith & Wesson stamping. As with other revolvers of the period which were made by this firm, it broke at the top.

Will you give me the approximate year this arm was manufactured, together with the range as compared with the Colt forty-five of its period?" —BEN F. NEWLON, Los Angeles, Cal.

Reply, by Mr. Donegan Wiggins:—Your friend of the old days was evidently either misinformed as to the caliber and sales restrictions of his Smith & Wesson, or else was having a little fun with you; Smith & Wesson never made a .48 caliber revolver, nor did they make any that had the sales confined to any one country.

The largest bore Smith & Wesson I know of was the old .46 Rimfire, and four of those Russian model Smith & Wessons hang about me as I write, saw-handle and round butt, all .44 Russian caliber, too. One model, the Schofield, a brain-child of an Army officer, was made in .45 caliber, using a charge of thirty grains of black powder, while the .45 Colt Frontier used forty grains, both using a bullet of heavy weight, the Colt 250 grains, and the Smith & Wesson 250 grains.

The Smith & Wesson single-action tipup model seems to have been first used in about 1870, when some were furnished to both Russian and American armies. Two types of cartridges were furnished in this model, the .44 Russian and the .44 American, as well as .44 and .46 caliber rimfire, the first two being centerfire.

As to history, I can not give any particulars revolving about this arm, although the .44 Russian shot a score the year I was born (1888) that has as yet not been surpassed, to my knowledge; sixteen straight tens outdoors at fifty yards, by Sergt. Johnson of the Mass. National Guard.

Colts made a .47 caliber cap-and-ball and a .476 cartridge revolver in past years, but no .48 calibers.

Dog Suicide

IT DOESN'T seem possible.

Request:—"I am going to ask you if the following story has any chance of being an actual fact.

Several years ago, a friend of mine bought a year old Llewellyn setter. An Indian friend of his, called Pete, undertook to train the dog on his farm.

Later in the season we called on Pete to see the dog and to note what progress had been made in training. But—the dog was dead! Pete told us the dog had hung itself. He kept it in a barn tied up with an overhead wire to give it some freedom. When he came to feed it one morning, the dog had tangled itself in the rope and had strangled to death.

He maintained that the dog committed suicide because of lonesomeness, also because it was tied up.

Is he right or wrong?

Has there ever been a case on record of dogs having the intelligence (or lack of it) to commit suicide?

If so, where were they and what reasons were given for the dog getting that way?"

—CARL A. MOLINE, Detroit, Mich.

Reply, by Mr. John B. Thompson:—Doubt very much that a dog would commit voluntary suicide, though it got ever so lonesome. Would hate to slander a dog by accusing it of such a thing. Fright, worry to get away, could cause many entanglements which brought about its death, with help of wire, etc. I do not believe in the suicide theory, but accident looks a whole lot more reasonable.

Panama

HERE is a question that we can't believe will ever prove serious.

Request:—"What prevents an enemy from damaging the Panama Canal?"

—H. B. HINES, Orlando, Fla.

Reply, by Mr. Charles Bell Emerson:—Upon approaching the locks the first thing a ship would encounter (if through miscalculation, or evil intent) is the "Giant Chain", which is made up of links, the metal of which is 3-inch diameter; this chain is 428 feet long, and is stretched across the entrance of the lock; on each end of this chain there is a hydraulic paying-out mechanism of cylinders, the whole apparatus being capable of standing a pressure of 262 *tons.*

The action of this mechanism is practically just the reverse of a hydraulic jack.

After a ship strikes this chain, the ship's momentum will be gradually reduced; its energy being absorbed by the chain mechanism. This chain does not "give" *any* until the pressure against it amounts to 100 *tons.*

Another thing to note is the fact that no vessel is allowed to pass into the Panama Canal unless it has a "Canal Pilot" on board, and in charge of everything while the ship is passing through the canal and locks.

When a ship is to be put through the locks this Giant Chain is let down into great grooves in the floor of the lock, so as to be clear of anything passing above it.

Aside from this chain, the shore guns would have their immediate effect upon any vessel showing any hostile symptoms; and she might in addition receive several of those big bombs upon her deck, dropped from some of Uncle Sam's sky machines, kept at the Canal Zone for emergencies.

Furthermore, the different nations now using the Panama Canal might seriously object to being forced to sail around South America instead of going through the Panama Canal; and they might object strongly enough to even use some of *their* shells to demonstrate *how* badly they objected to having anyone try to put the Panama Canal out of commission.

I believe that it would be considered such a crime that all other nations would join in annihilating any vessel that attempted it.

Upon close study of the personnel at the Canal Zone, you would find a spirit of true Americanism controlling the men that are operating and guarding this great work; the same spirit that was in the men that built the canal under that great leader, Colonel George W. Goethals, Army Engineer and Chairman of the Canal Commission. Ever honored be his name.

Philippines

HOMESTEADING in the Province of Mindanao.

Request:—"I am trying to gather a little information on planting coconuts in the Philippines and would appreciate as many answers to the following as you can give:

1. How would I obtain 500 acres of land near Zamboarga (within 100 miles) and how much would it cost (roughly)?

2. How much would it cost to clear 500 acres of land and get it ready for planting?

3. What is the cost of ordinary field labor? Of carabaos? Of a six room house for myself?"

—ENS. W. W. PAULL, U. S. N. R., Coronado, Cal.

Reply, by Mr. Buck Connor:—1. In the Province of Catabato, Mindanao, there exists something like 3,000,000 acres of public land available for agriculture. This particular area contains some of the richest lands for agricultural purposes that can be found in the world. That's a big statement, but it is Government statistics.

2. An individual may homestead but 59 acres of land by the law, or he may purchase 247 acres according to law, and by the same token he may lease 2,530 acres. Lease contracts run for 25 years, and if all is within the text of law, and nothing unforeseen happens, the contract may be renewed. There is such a variance in cost of land, depending on the locale. Most of the Friar Lands have been sold. These lands were negotiated for by Hon. W. H. Taft when he was Governor-General of the Islands.

3. Again field labor is an unsettled matter. Some places it ranges from media-peso up. Carabaos around $1.00 peso. *Nipa* (thatch and bamboo), a wooden portable, or concrete, as far as houses go. It means a difference. Concrete is the best for tropical use, and once built is always built. Write the Manila Lumber Co., 944 Juan Luna, Manila, P. I., for an estimate on a house.

Throwing Knives

THIS impalement artist made his own.

Request:—"It must be possible somewhere to buy throwing knives. Will you please give me your opinion of the best types of knives for throwing and advise me also where they may be purchased?"

—GEORGE MORELL, Palo Alto, Cal.

Reply, by Mr. Robert E. Gardner:—I regret that I am unable to supply you with information as to throwing knives. I visited a circus this past year which featured an impalement act and took the opportunity to discuss with the performer the knives which he used. I was informed they were fashioned by hand, by the artist himself, and their use was simply a matter of practise.

These knives were simply constructed: length twelve and one-half inches; cross-hilted; width of blade flaring to point end which placed the balance in the center of the over-all dimension.

I know of no manufacturer who produces such knives.

Running

RHYTHMIC arm motion is essential to the proper stride.

Request:—"I am a runner, or at least I think I am. I was considered pretty good for awhile (made a hundred in ten seconds flat), and then I dropped back. Can't make it in less than fifteen seconds. Have I gone stale? Haven't been running long. About two or three years at the most, I should say.

My stride, I know, is too long for a dash. It is sort of long and hesitating. I have tried every conceivable way to shorten the stride and make it rhythmic, but to no avail.

So as a last resort, I am seeking your advice: How can I shorten my stride—and what exercises must I take to do so. I will appreciate it very much if you will give me a sort of training schedule."

—PVT. EDWARD SCARPELLE, Honolulu, I. H.

Reply, by Mr. Jackson Scholz:—I believe you will find the trouble with your sprinting in your arms. You have not been sprinting too long, and if you have ever run even time there is every reason to believe that you can come pretty close to it again.

The arms are more important than most sprinters realize. Rhythmic arm action tends toward rhythmic leg action, and a hard pulling arm action will, I believe, tend to shorten your stride.

Work your arms *hard* at the sides of your body, not across it. Start your pull from a point on the level with your head, and bring your arm down hard, keeping it bent at about a ninety degree angle at the elbow. It is also essential to get your shoulders into the motion, but this can only be acquired through lots of practise.

It is probable too that you are overtraining—working too hard. A sprinter doesn't require a great deal of work after once getting into condition. I would not suggest a *hard* hundred more than twice a week, and a hard 220 only once. Do a lot of starting, and it won't hurt you to stride through (three-quarters speed) the 100 and 220 every day.

Marine Corps

A BRIEF résumé of the qualifications for enlistment; the pay; the duties; and the chance for advancement.

Request:—"I wish you would send me information regarding the enlistment regulations of the Marines.

1. How tall? 2. What knowledge is necessary, if any? 3. Can an enlisted man if he wishes, after serving one year, by paying a certain sum get discharged?"

—HARRY MACPHERSON, Sault Ste. Marie, Mich.

Reply, by Capt. F. W. Hopkins:—Enlistment requirements of the U. S. Marine Corps:

1. Age 21 to 35. Height 62 to 74 inches. Weight 138 pounds minimum, and up about 2 pounds for each inch over 62. Eyes 20-20 or corrected by glasses. Sound teeth, four opposing molars. Normal color preception. Sound physical condition, no broken bones, skin trouble, missing fingers, etc.

Young men between 18 and 21 may enlist if they present a birth certificate or affidavit setting forth correct date of birth, and signed, sworn, consent of both parents or guardian.

Must never have been convicted of a crime or discharged other than honorably from any U. S. service. Must be citizens of the U. S. Must present evidence in the form of letters of recommendation, as to character and morals.

2. Must be able to read and write; grammar school education is sufficient.
3. Enlistment is for four years. Discharge cannot be secured by purchase.

Pay, of a private is $21.00 per month. Private 1st Class, $30.00 per month. Extra pay for special duty men, for all men qualified with the rifle at target practise each year. Clothing allowance furnishes ample clothing. Rations furnished are good quality and sufficient quantity. Quarters are adequate and heated in cold climates.

Duties are as guard, etc., on battleships, some cruisers and other major Naval craft. Guards at Naval stations and Navy yards, in the U. S. and in possessions. Guards at American Legation, Peking, and other places. Advanced base forces are ready and prepared to shove off at the bases at Quantico, Virginia, and at San Diego, California. Expeditionary forces are now in Nicaragua and in Haiti.

Whips

CARIBOU-HIDE Eskimo dog whips are hard to buy, because they are mostly made by the native and mail drivers who use them.

Request:—"I have been making a collection of whips from all parts of the world, and I am interested in obtaining an Eskimo dog whip.

According to certain writers, a whip of this sort is about 35 feet in length, or longer, and made of caribou hide or caribou gut. I would like, if possible, to obtain a new, serviceable whip of this sort, not a relic or souvenir article.

Can you inform me where I would be able to purchase such a whip, or suggest where I might write for such information?"

—EDWIN SOUTHERLAND, Tulsa, Okla.

Reply, by Mr. S. E. Sangster:—Just what is your best way to obtain such an Eskimo dog whip as you seek is problematical. They are not on sale anywhere, so far as I am aware, but made by the natives in the Arctic and Labrador for their own use—generally out of caribou hide. Their length varies according to the number of dogs used as a dog team.

It is possible that the Hudson's Bay Company might help you, if you wrote their headquarters in Canada—H. B. Company (Commissioner) Winnipeg, Canada, or Montreal, Canada—perhaps by having one of their Arctic Post Factors obtain such a whip from one of their natives and sending it down. Or you might obtain such by writing the Grenfell Hospital in Newfoundland—who might obtain such a whip for you—as these are used extensively by the Labrador natives and the mail drivers.

Our Experts—They have been chosen by us not only for their knowledge and experience but with an eye to their integrity and reliability. We have emphatically assured each of them that his advice or information is not to be affected in any way by whether a commodity is or is not advertised in this magazine.

They will in all cases answer to the best of their ability, using their own discretion in all matters pertaining to their sections, subject only to our general rules for "Ask Adventure," but neither they nor the magazine assume any responsibility beyond the moral one of trying to do the best that is possible.

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2. **Where to Send**—Send each question direct to the expert in charge of the particular section whose field covers it. He will reply by mail. DO NOT send questions to this magazine.
3. **Extent of Service**—No reply will be made to requests for partners, for financial backing, or for chances to join expeditions. "Ask Adventure" covers business and work opportunities, but only if they are outdoor activities, and only in the way of general data and advice. It is in no sense an employment bureau.
4. **Be Definite**—Explain your case sufficiently to guide the expert you question.

A Complete list of the "Ask Adventure" experts appears in the issue of the fifteenth of each month

THE TRAIL AHEAD—THE NEXT ISSUE OF *ADVENTURE*, MARCH 15th

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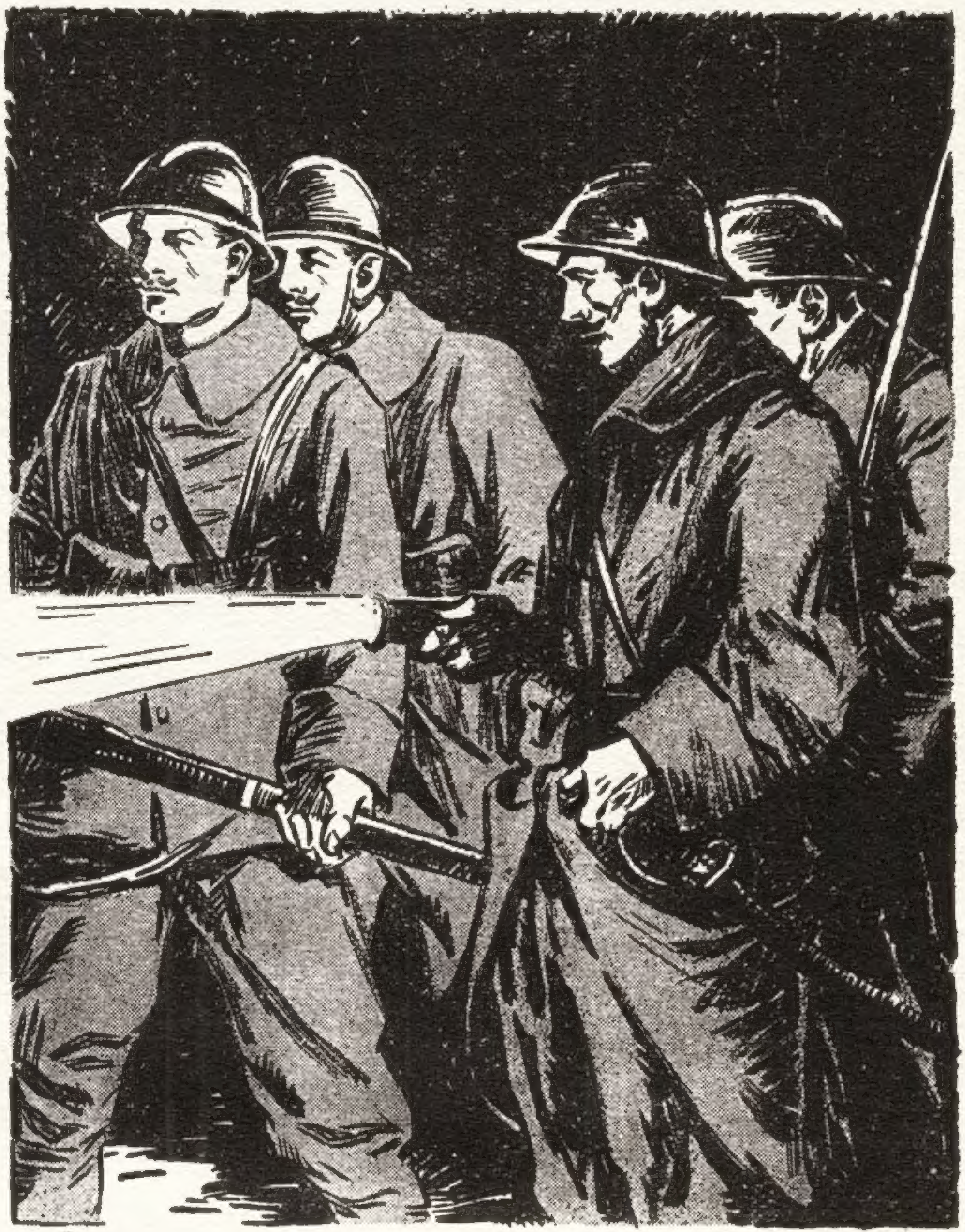

The PRISONER *of* VINCENNES

By ARED WHITE

And—These Fine Stories

Below Zero, beginning a great novel of the North Woods loggers, by Harold Titus; All Talk, a story of Indo-China, by H. Bedford-Jones; Losing A Good River Cook, a tale of the Mississippi, by Raymond S. Spears; Tusks and Ticals, a story of the Siamese Jungles, by Reginald Campbell; The Turn of the Tide, a story of Cain the Weasel, by F. St. Mars; Strange Places, a story of Formosa, by Sidney Herschel Small; The Battle of Bald Butte, a story of the Dry Landers, by Harry G. Huse; Master of the Conjurors' Guild, a mystery of gay Vienna, by Joseph Szebenyei; A Soldier-of-Fortune's Cook Book, more of those delightful reminiscences of General Rafael de Nogales; and the second half of They March From Yesterday, an epic of the Foreign Legion, by Georges Surdez.

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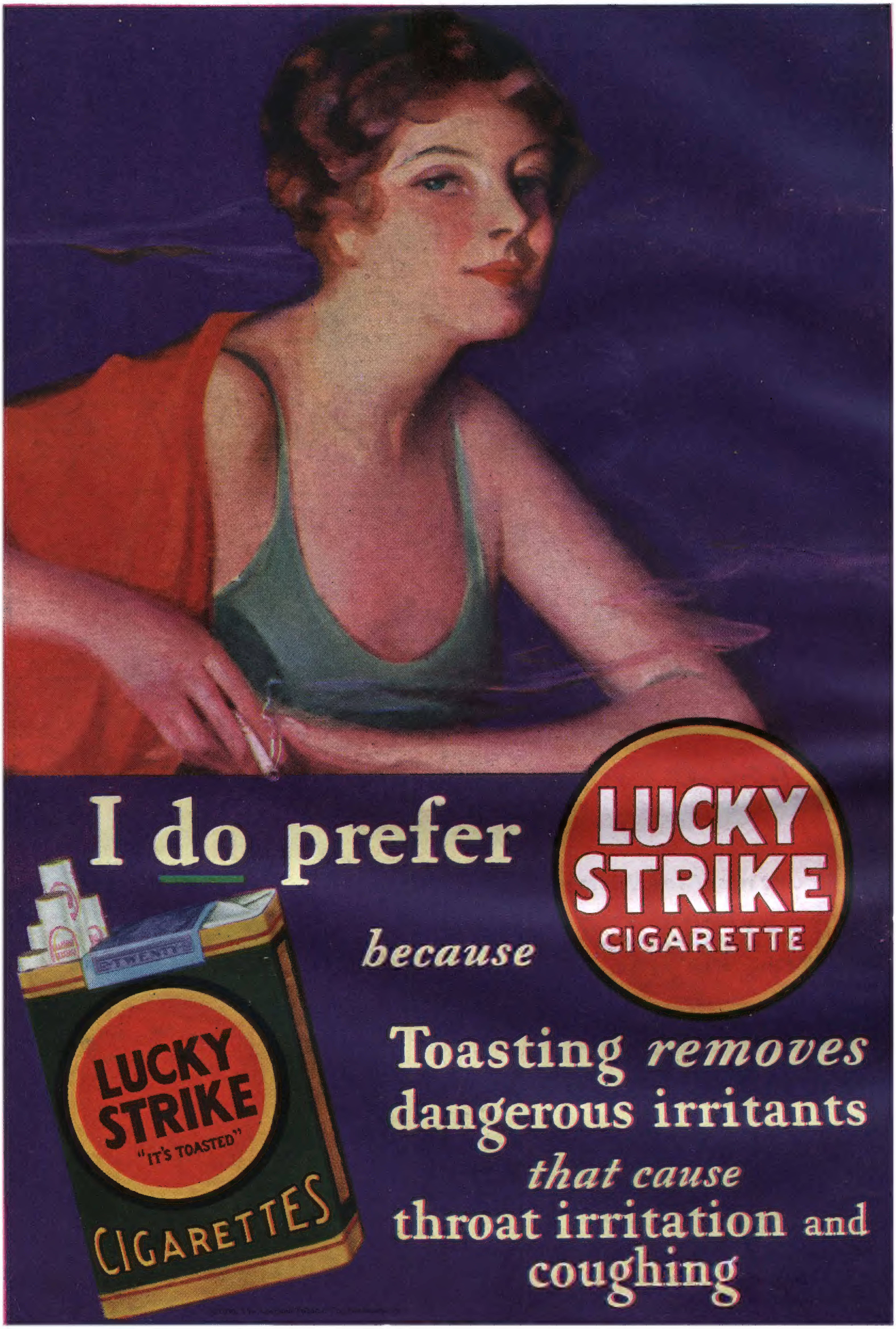
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